

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## US troops rescue American in Africa

*The Washington Post*

DAKAR, Senegal — U.S. Special Operations on Saturday rescued an American citizen who was kidnapped by armed attackers last week in southern Niger, the Pentagon said.

U.S. Navy SEAL Team Six led the overnight mission in northern Nigeria, where fighters loyal to al-Qaida and the Islamic State have established hideouts.

No service members were injured in the raid.

“This American citizen is safe and is now in the care of the U.S. Department of State,” said Jonathan Hoffman, assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs. “The United States will continue to protect our people and our interests anywhere in the world.”

The assailants forced Philippe Nathan Watson, 27, from his farm in remote Massalata

on Tuesday, demanding more than \$1 million from his family, who are missionaries.

Otherwise, they threatened to sell the captive to extremists, said a U.S. official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Groups linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State have made tens of millions of dollars from kidnappings in recent years, analysts say.

The extremists gained a foothold nearly a decade ago in the Sahel, which lies just south of the Sahara Desert, after the Libyan government collapsed and mercenaries once employed by Moammar Gadhafi streamed into neighboring Mali.

Violence has since spilled into Niger and Burkina Faso, turning the once peaceful countryside into conflict zones.

Watson’s abduction came

two months after ISIS fighters ambushed a giraffe sanctuary near Niger’s capital, Niamey, killing seven aid workers and their local guide.

The nation’s military has partnered with French and regional troops to fight rising extremism in West Africa. More than 5,000 people have died in the unrest this year alone, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which tracks the casualties.

Hundreds of American soldiers are stationed at two bases in Niger, a country of roughly 24 million. U.S. forces normally provide training and intelligence support in the region. Saturday’s operation was extremely rare, the official said.

“Thanks to the extraordinary courage and capabilities of our military, the support of our intelligence professionals, and our diplomatic efforts, the

hostage will be reunited with his family,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement Saturday.

Another American kidnapped in Niger is still missing.

Jeffrey Rey Woodke, a 59-year-old Christian aid worker, remains in captivity four years after ISIS militants snatched him in the country’s northern desert.

His wife, Els Woodke, urged his captors to free him this spring as the world battled the coronavirus pandemic.

“I would say, please consider Jeff’s age and what is going on in the world,” Woodke told ABC News. “It’s not good to keep captives. Send him home.”

Four hostages held by insurgents in Mali were freed last month in apparent exchange for about 200 prisoners suspected of working with the extremist groups.

## Petty officer gets 27-month term in bribery scandal

*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

SAN DIEGO — Brooks Alonzo Parks, a naval logistics officer serving in the western Pacific, was often quite specific about what he thought he deserved in exchange for the insider information he was leaking to military contractor Leonard Francis.

One time, it was a case of Hennessy Pure White cognac.

Another, it was a \$4,000-a-night room at the Ritz-Carlton in Singapore.

“It feels good living like a KING on an E-6’s salary!!!” Parks wrote in one email to Francis’ company, Glenn Defense Marine Asia, or GDMA, referring to his military pay grade.

Parks admitted back in 2007 that he’d been bitten by the GDMA “bug” by joining Francis’ deep network of naval officers who leaked proprietary information to give his company a competitive advantage

in exchange for bribes. On Friday, he followed the same path of many in that network by being sentenced in a San Diego federal courtroom to prison.

U.S. District Judge Janis Sammartino, who has overseen the massive court case involving Francis, handed down a 27-month term. Parks was also ordered to pay just over \$24,000 in restitution, a figure corresponding to the value of the bribes.

As a logistics lead petty officer in the 7th Fleet, Parks was in a prime position to offer Francis intelligence on ship itineraries, competitors and pricing to boost his company, which provides port services for visiting Navy ships. The relationship with Francis — nicknamed “Fat Leonard” for his girth — lasted from 2006 to 2010, according to Parks’ plea agreement.

Much of the quid pro quo is documented in emails between Parks and GDMA.

For instance, in 2009 Parks asked a GDMA employee for a “major hook up” — specifically a five-star suite at the Shangri-La hotel in Singapore “because I have a very special lady meeting me there!!! ... I need the suite to be especially nice. Let me know if you and the Boss need anything!!!”

Parks, 48, who lives in Maryland, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery in June.

“Parks traded on his important position of trust, selling his loyalty to a foreign defense contractor,” U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer said in a statement.

Parks is among 34 defendants — most of them Navy officials — who have been charged in the U.S. in the case. Twenty-three have pleaded guilty. Francis, who has cooperated with the investigation, has not yet been sentenced since pleading guilty.

# Midshipman sues to block his expulsion

Associated Press

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Chase Standage, a U.S. Naval Academy midshipman facing expulsion over social media posts, sees himself as a casualty of a campus “culture war.” Academy leaders say the damage to his military career was self-inflicted.

An academy official recommended disenrolling the white midshipman for tweeting a flurry of crude messages, including one in which he said Breonna Taylor received “justice” on the day police in Louisville, Ky., killed the Black woman during a drug raid.

But a federal judge in Mary-

land ultimately could decide whether the 21-year-old California native has a future as a Naval officer and pilot. U.S. District Judge Ellen Hollander didn’t immediately rule on Friday after presiding over a hearing on Standage’s request for a court order allowing him to finish his senior year and graduate.

The judge said Standage’s posts were “distasteful at best” and demonstrated poor judgment, but she questioned why he faces “the most draconian sanction he could get” when the academy explicitly permits midshipmen to express their personal opinions on social media.

“It appears that people in charge didn’t like his point of view. Not the way he said it but what he said,” Hollander said.

Standage sued to block his separation from the academy, claiming it violated his First Amendment right to freely express his views. His lawsuit also claims academy leaders violated his Fifth Amendment right to due process, denying him a fair and impartial disciplinary hearing. He is accused of violating academy rules governing political activity and of engaging in conduct unbecoming a midshipman.

Hollander expressed doubt that she will rule before the academy’s semester ends on

Dec. 12. She previously ruled that Standage could remain at the academy while his lawsuit is pending.

Academy investigators also singled out several other tweets in which Standage advocated using lethal force against civilians.

“All it takes is one drone strike,” he tweeted in response to another user’s post about “antifa extremists” in Seattle.

Standage’s attorney, Jeffrey McFadden, said other midshipmen with different views than Standage routinely violate the same standards without any consequences.

## More states to use Guard on Election Day

BY ROSE L. THAYER  
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — About 400 members of the Wisconsin National Guard will serve as poll workers during Tuesday’s presidential election, joining Guard troops in about 10 other states to support voting in various capacities.

“The Wisconsin National Guard has played a critical role in our response to the [coronavirus] pandemic and this mission is no different,” Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers said in a statement.

More than 10 states were planning to use troops as of Friday to support elections in various missions including cybersecurity, said Wayne Hall, spokesman for the National Guard Bureau, located at the Pentagon. Because elections are conducted by state governments, Guard members working election-related missions are not deployed on federal active duty.

Another five states are anticipating the need to deploy

troops next week, Hall said. Those numbers could change because not all states report nonfederal activations to the National Guard Bureau. Hall said he did not know which states were considering Guard deployments or how many troops could be activated.

Tuesday will be the fourth election in Wisconsin this year supported by Guard troops because of a shortage of poll workers in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Prior to 2020, troops had never supported the state’s elections.

Kentucky National Guard announced earlier this week that 280 troops will serve as poll workers and Tennessee National Guard officials said it will provide 13 facilities to serve as polling locations, along with about two service members as support staff at each site.

Officials in Washington state, Illinois and Tennessee have said they are actively providing troops to state and county officials to conduct cyber missions related to election security.

## Rescue workers seek survivors of earthquake in Aegean Sea

Associated Press

IZMIR, Turkey — Three young children and their mother were rescued from the rubble of a collapsed building in western Turkey on Saturday, some 23 hours after a powerful earthquake in the Aegean Sea killed at least 37 people and injured more than 800 others.

The Friday afternoon quake that struck Turkey’s Aegean coast and north of the Greek island of Samos registered a magnitude that Turkish authorities put at 6.6 while other seismology institutes said it measured 6.9. It toppled buildings in Izmir, Turkey’s third-largest city, and triggered a small tsunami in the Seferihisar district and on the Greek island. Hundreds of aftershocks followed.

At least 35 people were killed in Izmir, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said. Among them was an elderly woman who drowned in the tsunami. But rescue teams on Saturday made contact with 38-year old Seher Perincek and her four children inside a fallen building in Izmir and cleared a cor-

ridor to bring them out.

A 65-year-old man was saved 26 hours after the quake. Earlier Saturday, search-and-rescue teams working on eight collapsed buildings lifted teenager Inci Okan out of the rubble of a devastated eight-floor apartment building. Her dog, Fistik, or Pistachio, was also rescued, Turkish media reported.

In all, around 100 people have been rescued since the earthquake, Murat Kurum, the environment and urban planning minister, told reporters. It was unclear how many more people were trapped under buildings that were leveled.

Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency said 885 people were injured in Izmir and three other provinces. The health minister said eight people were being treated in intensive care, with three of them in critical condition.

Two teenagers were killed on the island Samos after being struck by a collapsing wall. At least 19 others were injured with two being airlifted to Athens and seven hospitalized on Samos, health authorities said.

# Limited response in states with 2nd waves

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Even as a new surge of coronavirus infections sweep the U.S., officials in many hard-hit states are resisting taking stronger action to slow the spread, with pleas from health experts running up against political calculation and public fatigue.

Days before a presidential election that has spotlighted President Donald Trump's scattershot response to the pandemic, the virus continued its resurgence Friday, with total confirmed cases in the U.S. surpassing 9 million.

The number of new infections reported daily is on the rise in 47 states. They include Nebraska and South Dakota, where the number of new cases topped previous highs for each state.

The record increases in new cases have eclipsed the spikes that set off national alarms last spring and summer. During

those outbreaks, first in the Northeast and then in Sun Belt states, many governors closed schools and businesses and restricted public gatherings.

But this fall's resurgence of the virus, despite being far more widespread, has brought a decidedly more limited response in many states. Most are led by Republican governors backing a president who insists, falsely, that the country is getting the virus under control.

Over the past two weeks, more than 76,000 new virus cases have been reported daily in the U.S. on average, up from about 54,000 in mid-October, according to Johns Hopkins University. Deaths are also rising, from about 700 to more than 800 a day.

Nevertheless, many officials have resisted calls to enact measures like statewide mask mandates or stricter curbs on the size of gatherings, casting the response to the virus as a matter of individual decision-making.

"At the end of the day, personal responsibility is the only way. People will either choose or not choose to social distance, or choose to wear a mask or not," said Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee, a Republican. "What we can do is to remind them is that personal responsibility can protect them."

Lee's state is among those without a blanket mask mandate despite a study released this week showing that areas of Tennessee where people are not required to wear them are seeing the most hospitalizations.

In Iowa, where a record 606 coronavirus patients were hospitalized Friday, one health expert said officials there had been too quick to reopen, along with several neighboring states.

"If we follow the course that the other Midwestern states like Wisconsin, North Dakota and South Dakota have, we're going to have trouble keeping up," said Dr. Ravi Vemuri, an infectious disease specialist at MercyOne hospitals.

## Sean Connery, 'original James Bond,' dies at age 90

Associated Press

LONDON — Scottish actor Sean Connery, the first actor to play James Bond on film and for many fans the best, has died. He was 90.

Bond producers EON Productions confirmed his death, first reported by the BBC. Producers Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli said they were "devastated by the news."

"He was and shall always be remembered as the original James Bond whose indelible entrance into cinema history began when he announced those unforgettable words — 'The name's Bond... James

Bond,'" they said in a statement.

The producers said Connery's "gritty and witty portrayal of the sexy and charismatic secret agent" was largely responsible for the success of the series.

The Scottish actor rose to international superstardom as the suave and fearless secret agent, first playing Bond in "Dr. No" in 1962.

After a further four films, he abandoned the role, before being enticed back to play him twice more, finally in 1983's "Never Say Never Again."

While he will be most remembered for his portrayal of Bond, Connery enjoyed a varied career, which included the best sup-

porting actor Oscar for his portrayal of a tough Irish street cop in the 1987 movie "The Untouchables."

He also had major roles in films including "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," "Highlander" and "The Hunt for Red October."

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she was "heartbroken" at the news.

"Our nation today mourns one of her best loved sons," she said.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2000 for services to film drama and in 2005 he was chosen for a lifetime achievement award by the American Film Institute.

## Protests erupt in Wash. over Black man killed by police

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, Wash. — Tensions boiled over into unrest late Friday following a vigil for a Black man shot and killed by law enforcement in a city near Portland, Ore., in southwestern Washington state.

Mourners gathered in Hazel Dell, an unincorporated area of Vancouver, Wash., where family and friends say Kevin E. Peterson Jr., 21, was shot Thursday

night. The city is about 12 miles north of Portland.

Hundreds of people gathered for the vigil Friday evening, with some holding signs reading, "Honk for Black lives. White silence is violence" and "Scream his name."

Nearby, tensions flared between left- and right-wing protesters. Video recorded by journalists in a parking lot showed two groups of people shouting at each other. Also,

some armed demonstrators gathered near a building they told reporters they were protecting.

The crowds ultimately fizzled out near the vigil but a group of hundreds of protesters later marched through downtown Vancouver. Windows were shattered, flags were burned and federal agents clothed in riot gear surrounded a building — warning people that trespassing on federal property

would be subject to arrest.

Multiple videos showed two vehicles facing each other just after midnight on a downtown street. Two shots were heard but reporters at the scene said it didn't appear anyone was hit.

Authorities declared an unlawful assembly and ordered protesters to disperse. At least one person appeared to have been detained, according to video posted online by a journalist.

# Surge in virus cases filling ND hospitals

Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. — The rampant spread of the coronavirus in North Dakota is putting its hospitals to the test, as the steady influx of people requiring in-patient stays has left only about 200 regular beds and 20 in intensive care units vacant, health officials indicated Friday.

After escaping the surge in cases that many other states were dealing with early on during the pandemic, North Dakota has the nation's highest number of new cases per 100,000 people over the past two weeks, according to The COVID Tracking Project.

The state reached a grim new milestone on Friday, as its COVID-19 death toll eclipsed the 500 mark, rising by 13 to 512, according to state health data. Nearly half of those deaths, 241, have occurred this month.

Hospitalizations from the disease caused by the coronavirus also reached a new high for the state, 191, with a net increase of seven since Thursday.

The state health department reported 1,357 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Friday, which was also a record high for North Dakota, eclipsing the record set one day earlier by 135 cases.

## California

SAN FRANCISCO — A California county has filed a lawsuit against a San Jose church to stop it from holding weekly indoor services for hundreds of people, claiming \$350,000 in fines have not stopped church officials from violating coronavirus shutdown orders.

Santa Clara County said Friday it filed for a restraining order against Calvary Chapel San Jose and Pastor Mike McClure over the services that attract about 600 people who don't wear masks or social distance.

Under the county's health order, indoor gatherings for religious or other purposes are capped at 100 people, masks must be worn, and social distancing requirements must be

followed.

"After church officials made clear they had no intention of ending their dangerous conduct, the county counsel and district attorney filed the request for a court order," the county said.

## Iowa

LOGAN — A surge in coronavirus cases has led officials in one western Iowa county to require people to wear face masks in public.

The Harrison County Board on Thursday approved the mask mandate in a 2-1 vote, according to television station KETV.

Supervisor John Straight, who voted for the mandate, said he hopes requiring masks will help reduce virus numbers in the county, where the positivity rate of the virus has topped 20% for three straight weeks.

Outbreaks in elder care facilities have been driving the county's numbers up, said Brad Brake, the county's health administrator. Brake said 266 of the county's more than 700 confirmed cases come from nursing homes, and 16 COVID-19 deaths had been recorded in the county as of Friday. Statewide, 76 long-term care facilities have outbreaks, Iowa Department of Public Health data shows.

## North Carolina

CHARLOTTE — Health officials on Friday eased a shutdown of a North Carolina church where a COVID-19 outbreak stemming from a week-long event led to 181 cases and six deaths.

Mecklenburg County health officials announced the decision on the same day 35 new COVID-19 cases and one additional fatality were reported from the outbreak at The United House of Prayer for All People, The Charlotte Observer reported. The church was prohibited last weekend from holding in-person gatherings at its buildings after convocation events earlier this month

resulted in the outbreak.

The modified order, effective immediately, allows nearly a dozen House of Prayer locations in Mecklenburg County to reopen with capacity limits.

## New Mexico

ALBUQUERQUE — New Mexico on Friday marked a grim milestone, as deaths related to the coronavirus topped 1,000.

The statewide toll surpassed the mark with the addition of 13 more deaths, the most in a single day since the pandemic began. They included two women in their 20s and another in her 30s who all had underlying conditions.

The tally came as New Mexico struggles with increasing rates of spread and record daily case totals and hospitalizations. In just a week, the number of deaths in the state jumped by about 43%. Nationally, the U.S. is averaging just over 800 coronavirus deaths a day, up about 14% over the past two weeks.

## New York

ALBANY — A federal judge in upstate New York on Friday upheld the state's restrictions on religious gatherings in coronavirus hot spots.

The decision by U.S. District Judge Gary Sharpe in Albany followed two other similar rulings earlier last month that also refused to block Gov. Andrew Cuomo's limits on areas in the state that are deemed COVID-19 hot spots.

The rules limit indoor prayer services to 10 people in areas where the virus is spreading fastest. In other areas within hot spots, indoor religious services are capped at 25 people.

The plaintiffs asking for the rules to be blocked include two Catholic priests who aren't in virus hot spots, as well as several Catholic and Jewish residents of parts of New York that had been designated as such.

In his decision denying a temporary restraining order against the rules, Sharpe said, "the court is satisfied that the initiative was guided by science and data."

## Texas

EL PASO — Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton on Friday joined several El Paso County restaurant owners in suing to block a county order shutting down all non-essential activities for two weeks.

The suit comes a day after County Judge Ricardo Samaniego ordered the shutdown amid a skyrocketing number of COVID-19 cases he said was "overwhelming" the county's medical resources.

In-person dining was among the non-essential activities Samaniego's order targeted. The order also closed bars, gyms, tattoo parlors and nail and hair salons, and directed residents to shelter in place except for essential tasks.

According to the lawsuit, the county order violates Gov. Greg Abbott's emergency orders that reopened those targeted activities. In a letter to Samaniego, Paxton wrote that Abbott's most recent order "explicitly preempts all contradictory local orders," rendering the county judge's order "invalid and unenforceable."

## Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma health officials reported 1,302 new cases Friday of coronavirus.

That raised the state's total by 1.1% to 121,495 since the outbreak struck at the start of March, the Oklahoma State Department of Health said. That kept Oklahoma in the COVID-19 "red zone," Johns Hopkins University reported.

Of those cases, 15,032 are active, an increase of 64 from Thursday. Of those active cases, 865 have required hospitalization, down by 20 from Wednesday and by 91 from the record high set Oct. 23, state health officials said.

However, the true number of cases in Oklahoma is likely higher because many people have not been tested, and studies suggest people can be infected and not feel sick.

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Dead zone in bay is the smallest in years

**MD** SALISBURY — Researchers said the Chesapeake Bay's infamous dead zone is the smallest it's been in years.

The so-called dead zone is an area where oxygen levels are so low that aquatic life dies. The area is caused by pollution, often from runoff from farms and cities in the bay's watershed.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources found that the bay's average dissolved oxygen conditions were the second best on record since 1985. The only year in which the dead zone was smaller was in 2012.

## White rhino births 150-lb baby at park

**FL** ORLANDO — It's a boy — a big boy.

A 150-pound white rhinoceros was born at Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park at Walt Disney World in Florida recently.

The as-yet-named rhino was born to Kendi, who was the first white rhinoceros born at the animal theme park back in 1999.

Both mom and son are doing well under the care of their human keepers, Disney said in a news release.

White rhinos are the second-largest land mammal and are an endangered species with a near-threatened status.

## 60 charged in elder fraud magazine scheme

**MN** MINNEAPOLIS — Sixty people were charged in a widespread magazine telemarketing scam that authorities said netted

\$300 million from more than 150,000 elderly and vulnerable people nationwide, the U.S. attorney's office in Minnesota announced.

U.S. Attorney Erica MacDonald said in a statement that 60 defendants face a host of charges, including conspiracy, mail fraud, wire fraud, and violating the Senior Citizens Against Marketing Scams Act of 1994. The defendants are from 14 states and two Canadian provinces.

The indictments and other court documents said that over the last 20 years, the defendants used a network of dozens of fraudulent magazine sales companies and telemarketing call centers to carry out the scam.

## Kitten rescued after getting frozen to tire

**CO** COMMERCE CITY — A kitten was rescued in Denver after it was frozen to a tire on a semi-trailer at a tire shop, an animal shelter and humane society said.

The Dumb Friends League said the 5-week-old kitten was found hanging off the side of a tire with her paws and tail frozen to the metal surface, KDVR-TV reported. It is unclear how long it was stuck.

The Dumb Friends League said the kitten appears to be healthy and a veterinary team will monitor it for a few days before going to a foster home until it is 8-weeks-old and ready for adoption.

## Rocket booster likely source of lights in sky

**HI** HONOLULU — Reports of a cluster of blinking lights traveling across Hawaii's night sky were likely caused by a rocket booster reentering the planet's atmosphere, scientists said.

Astronomers said there is a high probability the booster pierced Earth's atmosphere after orbiting for 12 years, The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported.

The booster identified by scientists was used to launch Venezuela's communications satellite VENESAT-1 from China in October 2008.

What residents saw was the rocket body heating during reentry and breaking into pieces, said Roy Gal, associate astronomer of the Institute for Astronomy at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

## Judo champion subdues armed, would-be robber

**MO** KANSAS CITY — Police said a would-be robber was in custody after picking the wrong guy to victimize — a Judo champion.

WDAF-TV reported that Josh Henges, 36, was in the Midtown area when someone came up from behind, grabbed his shoulder and tried to rob him. Henges has traveled around the world competing in Judo events and training others. He's a former member of the national Judo team.

Henges turned to see a gun pointed directly at him. He took the suspect to the ground, pinned him and called police.

## Number of endangered whales sinks more

**ME** PORTLAND — The population of an endangered species of whale that has been the focus of conservation efforts for decades has dipped to less than 370.

The North Atlantic right whale numbers only 366, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said in an estimate that reflects the population as of January 2019.

The previous estimate, which reflected that of January 2018, was 412.

The whales have struggled with poor reproduction and high mortality over the last decade.

## Eagle Scout sentenced for robbing 2 banks

**MA** WORCESTER — An Eagle Scout who researched how to rob banks on YouTube was sentenced to 2½ years in prison after his attorney requested leniency because his client had reached a low point in his life and was driven by substance abuse and undiagnosed mental illness.

In addition to his prison sentence, Samuel Jose Baptista, 27, of Boston was also sentenced in U.S. District Court in Worcester to two years of probation and was ordered to pay restitution, federal prosecutors said in a statement.

Baptista pleaded guilty in February to robbing banks in Worcester and Revere in October 2019.

## Officials: Driving school gave answers for a fee

**FL** TALLAHASSEE — A Florida driving school was suspended after investigators said it was providing correct answers to people taking a written driver license test, the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles announced.

Universal Driving School in Oakland Park charged undercover investigators at least \$400 to take the exam and then ensured that they'd pass it, the agency said in a news release.

The driving school also sold investigators Alcohol Drug Accident Prevention Training certificates even though they did not take the four-hour course required to receive them.

From wire reports

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# NFC West strongest division in the NFL

Associated Press

Here's a premise few can dispute: The NFC West is the best division in pro football.

In fact, it isn't close.

Sure, the AFC North has shown some power, but it also has the 1-5-1 Bengals. Plus, the Browns have built their 5-2 record mostly against the league's dregs.

NFC West teams are 19-8 overall. The AFC North is 17-8-1, but it's top-heavy, and until we truly know if Cleveland is legitimate, the guys on the West Coast win the prize.

It's not inconceivable that the Seahawks, Cardinals, Rams and 49ers all could find their way into the NFC playoffs with a third wild card added. It's unlikely, though, because they could be knocking off each other during intradivision play. So far, only three games have been played within the division: Arizona beating San Francisco and Seattle, and the Niners defeating the Rams.

"Yeah, we're in the best division in football and, you know, there's a reason for it," Rams quarterback Jared Goff said after the loss to the 49ers. "These guys are good. Arizona's good. Seattle's obviously undefeated (then). We're a great team. So every time you play in this division, it's going to be a tough game, and we know that coming in."

What the four clubs also know, coming in and going out,

is they could be battered by the time they get to January. Fully tested by the trials and tribulations of the division, for sure. But perhaps not in the best shape for a Super Bowl run.

"Obviously, everybody has winning records in our division and everybody's doing really good, and some people might say we have the best division," said Tyler Lockett, the Seahawks' outstanding wide receiver. "But at the end of the day, who cares? We still got to be able to take care of business and those divisional games might end up being key."

The schedule shows a regular dose of those divisional showdowns, beginning Sunday with the Seahawks hosting the 49ers. They gave us a classic 2019 finale in which tight end Jacob Hollister was stopped inches short of a touchdown that would have lifted Seattle to the division crown.

Beyond this weekend, Seattle visits Los Angeles in Week 10; Arizona goes to Seattle in Week 11; the Rams host the 49ers in Week 12, then visit the Cardinals in Week 13; the Rams at Seahawks and Cardinals at Niners in Week 16; and the grand finale of Seattle at San Francisco and Arizona at Los Angeles on Jan. 3.

Don't be shocked if the division title and more than one wild-card spot are decided in Week 17.

When the Rams fell to the

49ers, all-world defensive tackle Aaron Donald noted: "I'd rather we lost every other game we did, but win this division game. That means a lot more."

Which of these teams is best positioned to not only emerge atop the NFL's premier sector, but do damage in the postseason? In a year impacted by a pandemic, with so many intangibles — and so many key injuries already — no one knows. But here are some thoughts.

## Seattle (5-1)

The Seahawks have the most dynamic player, Russell Wilson, and the most experienced coach, Pete Carroll. They also have a sieve of a defense that can't pressure opposing passers. Injuries have diminished the secondary and running back.

Still, their resourcefulness and versatility with the ball in a league where offense tends to rule, a relatively healthy Seattle is a Super Bowl threat.

## Los Angeles (5-2)

Rebounding nicely after a 2019 fade that followed a Super Bowl appearance, the Rams have the stingiest defense and the best player in the division, Donald. Goff's re-emergence as a dependable (or more) quarterback, operating behind a back-in-form offensive line, makes LA formidable.

There's also a concern that

the Rams sometimes overthink things. They do play on the edge. Regardless, they're capable of a return to the big game.

## Arizona (5-2)

Maybe arriving a year before expected, especially after losing pass-rushing demon Chandler Jones for the season, the Cardinals are 2-0 inside the NFC West. They have no fear of the big boys, but they also have more question marks than the others. Many of those apply to an inconsistent defense and offensive line.

Is Kyler Murray, the 2019 top offensive rookie, ready to lift the Cardinals to unexpected heights so soon? He certainly has the creativity and athletic ability. The excitement quotient is through the State Farm Stadium roof.

## San Francisco (4-3)

Teams that lose a Super Bowl tend to struggle the next season, as the Rams did in '19. But the 49ers' issues have been more related to injuries; only Philadelphia has been more damaged.

That said, many of the reserves, particularly on offense, have come through lately. But overcoming the losses of Nick Bosa, Richard Sherman and so many other regulars might be too tall a task for a deep January run.

# Hall of Fame cornerback Adderley dies at age 81

Associated Press

Herb Adderley, the Hall of Fame cornerback who joined the NFL as a running back and became part of a record six championship teams with the Packers and Cowboys, has died. He was 81.

His death was confirmed by the team Friday, with no details given. Nasir Adderley, a safety for the Los Angeles Chargers, tweeted that his cousin was a

"unique soul who has had such an incredible influence on my life."

Herb Adderley played in four of the first six Super Bowls and won five NFL championships with Green Bay and one with Dallas during his 12-year career.

Along with former teammates Fuzzy Thurston and Forrest Gregg, Adderley is one of four players in pro football history to play on six champi-

onship teams. Tom Brady is the other. Adderley was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1980.

Bart Starr, the Hall of Fame quarterback and a former Packers teammate, once called Adderley the "greatest cornerback to ever play the game."

Born on June 8, 1939, in Philadelphia, Adderley was a three-sport star in high school. He excelled at running back at Michigan State and was the

12th pick overall of the 1961 draft. He came to training camp expecting to compete for a starting job against future Hall of Fame running backs Jim Taylor and Paul Hornung.

Midway through the season, Packers coach Vince Lombardi switched Adderley to defense to replace injured starter Hank Gremminger.

The 6-foot-1, 205-pound Adderley had a career-best seven interceptions in 1962.

# Vikings limited at CB against Packers

Associated Press

The Minnesota Vikings could be without three of their top four cornerbacks — Cameron Dantzler, Holton Hill and Mike Hughes — on Sunday at Green Bay.

Hill (foot) and Hughes (neck) were ruled out on Friday with injuries for the game against the Packers, who are second in the NFL in scoring with an average of 32.8 points per game. Neither Hill nor Hughes practiced all week. Hill will miss his third straight game. Hughes missed two games earlier this season, was re-injured on Oct. 18 against Atlanta and placed on injured reserve on Friday. That means Hughes, the 2018 first-round draft pick who has played in only 24 career games, will be sidelined for a minimum of three weeks.

Dantzler was placed on COVID-19 reserve on Wednesday. Coach Mike Zimmer left open the possibility of him suiting up in Green Bay, but he would need to clear the league's return-to-play testing protocols in time. Otherwise, rookie Jeff Gladney would be the only regular cornerback available for the Vikings, an ominous sign for facing Aaron Rodgers. Kris Boyd, who was limited in practice this week with hamstring and back injuries, is next on the inexperienced depth chart, followed by Harrison Hand and Mark Fields.

The Vikings listed running back Dalvin Cook as questionable, though Zimmer said before Cook's status was designated that he anticipated a standard workload. Cook hurt his groin on Oct. 11 at Seattle

and was sidelined for the next game. He was limited in practice this week.

"He should be ready to go," Zimmer said.

The Packers won't have leading rusher Aaron Jones, who will miss a second straight game with a calf injury. That leaves Jamaal Williams and A.J. Dillon as Green Bay's top two running backs against the Vikings.

Green Bay also announced cornerback Kevin King will miss a third straight game with a quadriceps injury. Josh Jackson has been starting in King's place.

The Packers have listed offensive tackle David Bakhtiari (chest), kicker Mason Crosby (calf/back), running back Tyler Ervin (wrist), safety Raven Greene (oblique) and defensive lineman Tyler Lancaster

(shoulder) as questionable. Crosby practiced on a limited basis on Friday after not practicing at all Wednesday or Thursday.

Vikings linebacker Todd Davis joined Dantzler on the COVID-19 reserve list on Friday, and Zimmer confirmed the Vikings had entered the NFL's intensive protocol phase, requiring the organization to implement additional preventative measures against virus spread.

Davis could be replaced in the base defense by rookie linebacker Troy Dye, who was designated on Monday for return from injured reserve along with starting right guard Pat Elflein. Both Dye (ankle) and Elflein (thumb) practiced this week. They were hurt in Week 2.

# Rams want to join Dodgers, Lakers as LA champions

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Jared Goff texted congratulations to Cody Bellinger and Joc Pederson right after the Los Angeles Dodgers won the World Series on Tuesday night.

"Cody actually texted me back and said, 'It's your turn now,'" the Los Angeles Rams quarterback recalled Wednesday. "And I said, 'Absolutely.'"

Los Angeles has become a city of champions again in an incredible October, and the Rams (5-2) want to extend this winning feeling into February. They've been discussing it on group chats and in the locker room ever since the Lakers raised their trophy two weeks ago, and the anticipation only increased when the Dodgers claimed their own championship.

"It'd be good to make that a little three-peat with us involved there," Goff said. "It's definitely something that we're conscious of, absolutely."

The Rams were watching and cheering from home while the Lakers won the NBA Finals

in Florida just 16 days before the Dodgers raised the World Series trophy in Texas, capping an unprecedentedly quick back-to-back coronation for their metropolitan area's two most beloved teams.

Although the Rams are the city's most popular franchise in the nation's most popular sport, they realize they aren't nestled in LA's heart as snugly as the Dodgers or the Lakers — particularly not after their former owners moved them to Anaheim and St. Louis for 36 years before Stan Kroenke brought them home in 2016.

But the Rams fully intend to be a cornerstone of the sports establishment in the nation's second-largest metro area for decades to come. Kroenke's sparkling new \$5 billion SoFi Stadium in Inglewood is a major step toward that goal — and bringing a third championship in four months to Los Angeles just might cinch it.

Can the Rams do it? They've had three straight winning seasons, and they made it to the Super Bowl two years ago. Al-

though they play in the NFL's toughest division, they're off to another strong start this fall as they hit the midway point of the regular season Sunday at Miami (3-3).

"We've got all the pieces," Goff said. "We're winning games. We are playing well on offense, defense, special teams. We always believe in ourselves, and we've been there once with a lot of the same people. We know how to get there. We've just got to finish it off, and hopefully this is the year."

And now there's the City of Champions factor: If there is such a thing as civic momentum, the Rams are riding a big old wave of it alongside the Lakers and the Dodgers.

"You've got to be great to be relevant in this city, and I think that's awesome," said coach Sean McVay, a boyhood Atlanta Braves fan who now roots for the Dodgers and manager Dave Roberts, whom he describes as a role model.

"Really amongst the team it's, 'Hey, let's continue to produce and do our part to hold up

our end of the bargain for the city,'" McVay added.

The Rams actually arrived in Los Angeles before either the Lakers or the Dodgers, becoming the West Coast's first major pro sports franchise way back in 1946.

But their subsequent moves took them out of many LA sports fans' hearts until they returned to a city that infamously hadn't had an NFL franchise since 1994, when Georgia Frontiere and Al Davis simultaneously left a wildly lucrative market and its millions of hungry sports fans.

Although rings are irreplaceable, the Rams are steadily building their case to deserve LA's love. They've been winners since McVay took over in 2017, and the league machinations that subsequently landed the Chargers in LA instead of the Raiders — the childhood favorite team of most Generation X and many millennial Angelenos, thanks to their thrilling 13-year run in the Coliseum from 1982-94 — undoubtedly benefited the Rams' quest.

# Free agent total rises as teams cut back

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jon Lester, Corey Kluber and Brad Hand were among 15 more major leaguers who became free agents Friday when teams declined their 2021 options, many the victims of budget cuts following a regular season without fans due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Also cut loose were Milwaukee infielders Jedd Gyorko and Eric Sogard, Chicago White Sox designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion and left-hander Gio Gonzalez, and Philadelphia relievers David Robertson, Hector Neris and David Phelps.

AL champion Tampa Bay declined 2021 options on right-hander Charlie Morton and catcher Mike Zunino but says it remains hopeful of re-signing them.

There are 175 players who

became free agents following the World Series and about 15 more can go free this weekend. Among the remaining decisions are on player options by Yankees slugger Giancarlo Stanton, Boston designated hitter JD Martinez, Cincinnati outfielder Nick Castellanos and Mets reliever Dellin Betances. Teams must decide by 5 p.m. Sunday whether to make \$18.9 million qualifying offers to eligible former players who went free.

Lester gets a \$10 million buyout from the Chicago Cubs that completes a \$155 million, six-year contract rather than a \$25 million mutual option. The 36-year-old left-hander was 3-3 with a 5.16 ERA in 12 starts this year with 42 strikeouts and 17 walks. He earned a prorated \$5,555,556 from his scheduled \$15 million salary.

He was 77-44 with a 3.64 ERA in 171 starts over six seasons with the Cubs, in 2016

helping them win the first World Series in 108 years. He was 3-3 with a 2.44 ERA and .201 opponents' batting average in the postseason.

Milwaukee turned down Gyorko and Sogard, a day after declining a \$15 million option on 2011 NL MVP Ryan Braun.

Gyorko and Sogard each had \$4.5 million options. Gyorko gets a \$1 million buyout and Sogard \$500,000.

The 32-year-old Gyorko hit .248 with nine homers and 17 RBIs in 42 games and 135 at-bats. Sogard, who turns 35 on May 22, hit .209 with one homer, 10 RBIs and a .560 OPS in 43 games.

"I think there's a recognition that flexibility is important right now, and we don't know what the next couple of months are going to look like," general manager David Stearns said. "We don't know what the environment is going to be as we

do plan for a spring training in the 2021 season. So we have to remain flexible."

Cleveland declined Hand's \$10 million option and also turned down first baseman Carlos Santana (\$17.5 million). The Indians did exercise a \$5.5 million option for catcher Roberto Perez. Cleveland owes buyouts of \$1 million to Hand and \$500,000 to Carlos Santana.

Hand went 2-1 with a 2.06 ERA and went 16-for-16 in save chances in the 60-game season. Santana struggled in his second season back in Cleveland after leaving as a free agent in 2018. The switch-hitter batted a career-low .199 with eight homers and 30 RBIs in 60 games.

Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said it's possible the club could resign the 34-year-old Santana, who has spent 10 seasons with the Indians.

## Sports briefs

# Mets' Wilpon era nears end as sale is approved

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Wilpon family's control of the New York Mets neared its end after 34 years when Major League Baseball owners voted Friday to approve the sale of the team to billionaire hedge fund manager Steve Cohen.

The vote was 26-4, a person familiar with the meeting told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because the balloting was not announced. Cohen needed 75% approval.

The transfer from the Wilpon and Katz families values the franchise at between \$2.4 billion and \$2.45 billion, a record for a baseball team that tops the \$2 billion sale of the Los Angeles Dodgers from Frank McCourt to Guggenheim Baseball Management in 2012. The Mets sale is likely to close within 10 days.

Cohen said all Mets em-

ployees, including unionized groundskeepers, security guards and engineers, will receive restored pre-pandemic salaries as of Sunday that reverse 5-30% salary cuts begun in March. He valued the restoration at over \$7 million.

In other MLB news:

■ The Detroit Tigers have hired AJ Hinch to be their new manager, giving him a chance to return to a major league dugout after he was fired by Houston in the wake of the Astros' sign-stealing scandal.

"I understand how wrong it was, and I'm sorry for that," Hinch said. "I've said that before, I'll say it again, I'll continue to say it. I'll never forget the feeling that I've had throughout the past year as I've navigated this with my family, but you quickly get to the exciting time of getting back and leading a group of men again, and establishing what Tigers baseball's going to be all about."

## NBA, players extend CBA opt-out deadline

The NBA and its players agreed Friday to extend the deadline for opting out of the Collective Bargaining Agreement by one week until Nov. 6, and talks will continue in the interim regarding the numerous issues that have to be decided before next season begins.

It is the fourth extension of the opt-out deadline since the pandemic started in March. If either the NBA or the National Basketball Players Association chooses to opt out by that date, the CBA will be terminated Dec. 14 "unless the parties agree otherwise," the NBA said.

In other NBA news:

■ Mike D'Antoni and Amare Stoudemire are joining Steve Nash's coaching staff, bringing a glimpse of the old Phoenix

Suns to Brooklyn.

D'Antoni won the first of his two Coach of the Year awards in 2005 while leading the potent Suns to 62 victories behind the play of point guard Nash and power forward Stoudemire. He spent the last four seasons coaching Houston, leading the Rockets to the playoffs each season and winning his second Coach of the Year award in 2017.

## No 2021 inductees to Hockey Hall of Fame

TORONTO — The Hockey Hall of Fame will have no new inductees in 2021, with the class of 2020 honored that year instead.

The 2020 inductees were to have been inducted Nov. 16 in Toronto, but the ceremony was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.