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Marines may say no women on front lines

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps is expected to ask that women not be allowed to compete for several front-line combat jobs, inflaming tensions between Navy and Marine leaders, U.S. officials say.

The tentative decision has ignited a debate over whether Navy Secretary Ray Mabus can veto any Marine Corps proposal to prohibit women from serving in certain infantry and reconnaissance positions. And it puts Gen. Joseph Dunford, the Marine Corps commandant who takes over soon as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at odds with the other three military services, which are expected to open all of their combat jobs to women.

No final decisions have been made or forwarded to Pentagon leaders, but officials say

Defense Secretary Ash Carter is aware of the dispute and intends to review the Marine plan. The Marine Corps is part of the Navy, so Mabus is secretary of both services.

The ongoing divide has put Dunford in the spotlight as he prepares to start his new job next week. And it puts him in a somewhat awkward position of eventually having to review and pass judgment — as chairman — on a waiver request that he submitted himself while serving as Marine commandant.

The debate includes jabs at Mabus for his public criticism of the Marine plan that triggered a call for his resignation from a member of Congress.

Officials say the Army, Navy and Air Force are expected to allow women to serve in all combat jobs and will not ask Carter for any exceptions. They say that Special Opera-

tions Command is also likely to allow women to compete for the most demanding military commando jobs — including the Navy SEALs — though with the knowledge that it may be years before women even try to enter those fields.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Mabus on Monday made his position clear.

"I'm not going to ask for an exemption for the Marines, and it's not going to make them any less fighting effective," he said, adding that the Navy SEALs also will not seek any waivers. "I think they will be a stronger force because a more diverse force is a stronger force. And it will not make them any less lethal."

Mabus' comments angered Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif.,

who has asked Carter in a letter to demand Mabus' resignation because he "openly disrespected the Marine Corps as an institution, and he insulted the competency of Marines by disregarding their professional judgment, their combat experience and their quality of leadership."

Hunter, who served as a Marine in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Mabus' comments raise questions about whether he can be objective and continue to lead the Marine Corps. And he said Mabus should have no role in any decisions about women in the Marine Corps.

Under the current plan, the service chiefs will present their plans to the service secretaries, who will then forward recommendations to Carter. He will make the final decisions by the end of the year.

US plans to overhaul Syrian troop-training program

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is preparing a major overhaul of its failed effort to train thousands of moderate Syrian rebels to fight the Islamic State group, shifting from preparing rebels for front-line combat to a plan to embed them with established forces in northeastern Syria, U.S. officials said.

Instead of fighting the Islamic State in small units, the U.S.-trained rebels would be attached to larger existing Kurdish and Arab forces. They would be equipped with U.S. communications gear and trained to provide intelligence and to designate Islamic State targets for airstrikes in coordination with U.S. troops outside

Syria, the officials said.

The change amounts to an acknowledgement that the administration's current approach is not working. It was described by officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because a final decision on how to proceed has not been made.

The discussion of a new approach comes a day after the head of U.S. Central Command, Gen. Lloyd Austin, told Congress that the \$500 million effort to train 5,000 moderate Syrian rebels in a year had yielded "four or five" new fighters after another 50 or so were captured, wounded or fled in their first encounter with extremist militants.

The new approach is designed to intensify military pressure on Raqqa, the self-declared capital

of the so-called caliphate the Islamic State group has established across much of Syria and Iraq. The city is sometimes targeted by American-led coalition airstrikes, and Syrian government forces have occasionally targeted it as well.

In addition to changing the role of the U.S.-trained rebels, the Pentagon would scale back their numbers from the original target of 5,400 per year to a much smaller total, perhaps 500, the officials said. Their vetting, designed to weed out terrorist infiltrators, also would be streamlined, one official said Thursday.

Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook told reporters Thursday that officials are looking to make "adjustments," adding, "We're asking a host of

questions about this program." He said the plan is for it to continue "in some form or fashion." He was not more specific.

Austin, who leads the anti-Islamic State campaign, told a Senate committee Wednesday that only four or five U.S.-trained rebels are currently operating inside Syria. That compares with the administration's original goal to train and equip 5,000 fighters by the end of this year.

Austin's disclosure triggered an avalanche of caustic comments. Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., called it "a joke." Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said it was further proof that the administration's counter-Islamic State group strategy is an "abject failure."

Americans who stopped train attack honored

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Applause rang throughout the Pentagon's central courtyard Thursday afternoon as a massive crowd cheered the trio of childhood friends whose quick actions last month helped thwart catastrophe aboard a Paris-bound high-speed train.

Friends since middle school in California, Army Spc. Alek Skarlatos, Air Force Airman 1st Class Spencer Stone and California State University-Sacramento student Anthony Sadler were honored individually Thursday with top awards for noncombat valor.

Skarlatos and Stone each received the highest award in their service for noncombat heroism, the Soldier's Medal and the Airman's Medal, respectively. Sadler was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal of Valor, the DOD's highest civilian award for valor. Stone, who was stabbed by the heavily armed assailant while subduing him, was also presented the Purple Heart.

Their actions Aug. 21 when they chose to run toward the heavily armed Moroccan national — previously identified by European authorities as having jihadi beliefs — who opened fire on the train with an AK-47 was “an amazing story, right out of a movie,” Defense Secretary Ash Carter said before pinning the awards on the men.

The catalyst, Carter said, was Skarlatos, an infantryman with the Oregon Army National Guard, uttering, “Let's go.”

The ceremony wasn't even the highlight of the trio's first trip to Washington, Stone said. Meeting with President Barack Obama earlier Thursday in the Oval Office was “surreal.”

“It's just been amazing having this kind of welcome and having all these people show up,” said Skarlatos.

General: Bergdahl ‘wanted to create this PR event’

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO — The major general charged with an exhaustive investigation into Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's disappearance testified Friday that the soldier left his post believing that his absence would force authorities at nearby FOB Sharana to listen to his concern that his command was incompetent and was putting his unit in danger.

With that as his motive, Maj. Gen. Kenneth Dahl said that sending Bergdahl to jail if he were court-martialed on desertion and misbehavior charges and convicted would be wrong.

“I think it would be inappropriate,” he testified on the second day of Bergdahl's probable cause hearing.

When Bergdahl arrived at

the larger base, Dahl said, he planned to say, “I'm the guy you're looking for but I'm not saying anything until I talk to the general.”

“He knew the bells and whistles would go off,” Dahl said. “He wanted to create this PR event.”

Dahl said he interviewed Bergdahl for a day and half after his release from five years in captivity. He said he found him to be earnest, sincere and truthful — and said that the soldier believed his perceptions of command misconduct were true. “And I also believe he was wrong,” Dahl said, under questioning from lead defense attorney Eugene Fidell. “That's the sad irony.”

Dahl said the sergeant was an unrealistic idealist. He believed that if he perceived a

moral wrong, he had to take action, without worrying about repercussions to himself or the outcome. He also had an unrealistic view of his own abilities, Dahl said.

Dahl also testified that, based on his investigation, Bergdahl was apparently captured by the Taliban within 12 hours, and attempted to escape early on. He also said “there were no soldiers killed in searching for Sgt. Bergdahl.”

The probable cause hearing is being held in a basement conference room on Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. It will result in a report that will be used to decide whether the case is strong enough to proceed to court-martial or should be resolved in another manner.

Naval Academy revises Breathalyzer policy

The (Annapolis, Md.) Capital

Two school years ago, individual midshipmen returning at night, even those 21 and older, received Breathalyzer testing on weekends if suspected of being drunk in the Naval Academy dorm.

Last year, two companies of midshipmen, randomly chosen on weekends, received Breathalyzer testing after midnight in the dorm. These early-morning tests were intended to root out underage and binge drinking on weekends.

The academy has revised both policies, scal-

ing back testing that discourages midshipmen from coming home, officials said.

The “ability to return to Bancroft” was cited as an improvement by company commanders participating in a focus group for a routine visit by the Naval Inspector General in September 2014.

Now, eight midshipmen, randomly selected from 38 on watch, are tested at 6:30 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. This ensures they are fit for duty, Jensen said.

Academy officials have grappled with binge and underage drinking among the brigade of more than 4,000 midshipmen.

US, Russia defense chiefs talk about Syria

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. and Russia resumed military-to-military communications Friday to discuss ongoing operations in Syria.

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Russian Defense

Minister Sergei Shoygu spent 50 minutes on the phone early Friday to discuss what is necessary for both nations to conduct operations there, as Russia continues its buildup of a new air base in Latakia, Syria.

The call, which Russia initiated, was the first military-to-military discourse since

Russian troops entered Crimea in March 2014 to support pro-Russian forces. A senior defense official said Russia described its buildup as defensive in nature, but could not clarify whether that meant the buildup at Latakia was to defend its forces there against the Islamic State group or to defend the Assad regime.

Manning shows he's not done

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — All those doubters who kept saying that Peyton Manning was washed up, that his arm strength was depleted and his drive for championships diminished?

He silenced them along with everyone else in Arrowhead Stadium on Thursday night.

Manning calmly led the Broncos to a tying touchdown in the final minute, then watched from the sideline as Denver cornerback Bradley Roby returned Jamaal Charles' fumble 21 yards for another score with 27 seconds left to cap a stunning 31-24 victory over the Kansas City Chiefs.

"The talk doesn't really get to me," said Manning, who threw for 256 yards and three touchdowns along with a pick-six. "I don't read a lot of papers and watch a lot of analysis. But obviously, you get friends and teammates and it seems to make them quite angry."

"Obviously, it's nice when guys on your team, and your friends and family have your back. But it doesn't affect me," he added. "We're 2-0 and played two really good teams."

Much as he did last week against Baltimore, Manning struggled early against Kansas City (1-1), throwing a costly interception to rookie Marcus Peters as the Broncos dug themselves a 14-0 hole.

But when the game was in the balance, Manning looked like the vintage All-Pro. After Knile Davis had given the Chiefs

the lead with 2:27 left, Manning stoically led the Broncos down field. He completed three long passes to Demaryius Thomas, then hit Emmanuel Sanders on third-and-10 from the Chiefs 19 with 36 seconds remaining to knot the game 24-all.

And when Charles was stripped by Brandon Marshall on the next play from scrimmage, and Roby picked up the loose ball and ran it back, it was Manning who led the celebration.

So much for his championship drive withering away.

"Obviously, he's not done," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said. "You could see that in the Ravens game. When he wasn't being hit, he's the same old Peyton. He's what you saw here. Very similar."

What was unusual was seeing Charles cough the ball up twice.

The dynamic Chiefs running back is typically sure-handed, so when he fumbled early in the game to squander a good scoring chance, everyone on the Kansas City sideline simply brushed it off.

Then came the second fumble, one that essentially cost the Chiefs the game.

"I was just trying to make a play and wasn't careful with the ball," said Charles, who ran for 125 yards and a touchdown. "I should have been smarter and put two hands on the ball. I caused us this loss today. I tried to put the team on my back and I ended up losing the game."

Not entirely, of course. Alex Smith threw two interceptions and the Chiefs had five turnovers in all, and nine penalties kept scuttling what appeared to be

promising drives.

Oh, and Manning had something to do with the outcome, too.

Here are some of the takeaways from the Broncos' seventh straight win over the Chiefs:

Taking ownership: Reid said he was hoping Charles might pop a long run, which is why he didn't take a knee and head to overtime. "I'll take responsibility," Reid said.

DT and E: Thomas finished eight catches for 116 yards, while Sanders had eight catches for 87 yards and two touchdowns. "It was definitely one of the best games I've been part of," Sanders said.

Ugly execution: The turnovers and penalties were costly for the Chiefs, but so were third downs. They had seven of them and never converted one. "We pulled this game out, coming off a short week," DeMarcus Ware said. "It was a great win for us."

Peters makes a play: Marcus Peters had a memorable first touchdown, intercepting Manning and returning it 55 yards for a score. The first-round pick also had an interception last week against Houston. "It feels good," he said, "but it stings too bad. We're going away with a tough loss."

Houston, we have a problem: Chiefs linebacker Justin Houston had two more sacks, pushing his season total to three. He had a franchise-record 22 last season. "It's all about winning and we didn't win," he said, "so I guess I needed more sacks."

Peterson, Vikes ready to hit reset

Associated Press

EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. — Adrian Peterson's long-awaited return to the field was a game to forget — a measly 31 yards rushing for the Minnesota Vikings in their dreadful season opener at San Francisco.

Refocusing on the next one is the familiar weekly message around the NFL, of course, but Peterson acknowledged having a hard time putting that 20-3 defeat by the 49ers in the past. Two days later, he was still wearing a frown, his forehead creased. Finally, "the reset button has been pressed," Peterson said Thursday.

"I had those wrinkles all day yesterday. Just mad for no reason. Because we had moved on, but I just couldn't move on that quickly," Peterson said, before nudging the narrative forward: "I'm just looking to improve and be better this Sunday."

When the Vikings host Detroit for their home debut at TCF Bank Stadium, the game will mark Peterson's first in Minnesota since Dec. 1, 2013, a span of 658 days. He sat out the last two games at the Metrodome because of a sprained right foot and missed the team's temporary move outside last year, while his child abuse case proceeded in court in Texas and the league office. Peterson didn't play in any preseason games.

"I'm looking forward to it. It'll be exciting, fun, running out of that tunnel for the first time," Peterson said.

With those first-game feelings both physical (neck soreness from hard hits) and mental (running plays and blitz pickups at full speed) are out of the way, Peterson ought to be able to better settle in this weekend. He carried the ball only 10 times against the 49ers, limited action dictated by several factors starting with the deficit the Vikings faced down the stretch.

Under offensive coordinator Norv Turner and quarterback Teddy Bridgewater, the Vikings offense operates out of the shotgun or pistol formations most of the time. That's been a challenge for Peterson and his handoff timing.

Whether watching Jerick McKinnon or Matt Asiata replace him for a series or adjusting to a new style, though, Peterson understands how he's being used, even if he'd rather not spend that many snaps on the sideline.

"I have a lot of trust in coach Turner and what he's going to ask of us," Peterson said.

The Vikings must face a Lions defense that has held 23 of the last 33 opponents, the most in the NFL during that span, under 100 yards rushing. The first game in that stretch was against the Vikings in the 2013 season opener, when Peterson took his first carry 78 yards for a touchdown but netted only 15 yards on his other 17 attempts that afternoon in Detroit.

"We're going to do everything we can to let our best players make plays. We're going to do everything to have balance in what we do," Turner said. "Obviously, we want Adrian to be a big part of that."

Favre leads first-time HOF nominees

Associated Press

CANTON, Ohio — Brett Favre, Terrell Owens and Alan Faneca are among the 108 modern-day nominees for the Pro Football Hall of Fame class of 2016.

All three are first-time nominees in voting that will culminate Feb. 6, the night before the Super Bowl.

Favre retired as the NFL's leading career passer in most categories. Owens was one of the league's most prolific and dynamic receivers for most of his 15 pro seasons. Faneca was an elite blocker who made six All-Pro teams at guard in his 13 seasons.

Other first-year-eligible nominees are safety Lawyer Milloy; running backs Brian Westbrook and Clinton Portis; place-kicker John Carney; and linebackers Keith Bulluck and Mike Vrabel.

Already nominated by the seniors committee are Ken Stabler and Dick Stanfel. The 2016 contributor candidate is former 49ers owner Edward DeBartolo Jr.

NFL starts appeal of 'Deflategate' decision

NEW YORK — The NFL has filed documents with an appeals court, saying why

it disagrees with a federal judge's ruling in "Deflategate."

The 200-page filing with the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Thursday consists almost entirely of exhibits from the district court. In that case, Judge Richard Berman vacated NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's four-game suspension of New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

The league says the judge erred in his analysis of the law and precedents in at least three instances.

Brady was suspended and the Super Bowl champs were docked \$1 million and two draft picks after a league investigation found the team provided improperly inflated footballs for the AFC title game against the Indianapolis Colts in January.

Manziel to start as QB for Browns

BEREA, Ohio — Browns quarterback Johnny Manziel will start Sunday's home opener against Tennessee.

Manziel will be making his third NFL start, replacing Josh McCown, who sustained a concussion last week and has been following the NFL's protocol on head injuries.

The Browns announced Manziel's start

before Friday's practice was opened to the media.

McCown had been expected to practice, and coach Mike Pettine said if he did, the 36-year-old veteran would play against the Titans. Pettine will have an update on his quarterback following practice.

Manziel came off the bench last Sunday against the New York Jets after McCown was injured on Cleveland's opening drive. Manziel threw his first career TD pass, but also committed three turnovers in a 31-10 loss.

Manziel has shown progress following a rough rookie season, which was followed by him entering a rehab facility.

Packers RT Buluga out for Seattle game

GREEN BAY, Wis. — The Green Bay Packers will be without veteran right tackle Bryan Buluga for their home opener against the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday night. Coach Mike McCarthy said Friday that Buluga injured his left knee in practice on Thursday. The setback comes a year after the sixth-year pro suffered an injury to the same knee in the Packers' season-opening loss at Seattle.



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Bettman praises NHL parity

Associated Press

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman is a happy man these days, leading a league that seems strong on the ice, in the stands and on TV.

"The entertainment value of the game has never been better," Bettman said recently in an interview with The Associated Press.

What makes the commissioner particularly satisfied is the parity he sees. That means fans of nearly every team can have the highest of hopes every season. The Los Angeles Kings didn't even make the playoffs last season after winning the Stanley Cup championship a year earlier.

"Our competitive balance is extraordinary," Bettman said. "Seven teams made the playoffs that didn't make it the year before. And, the entertainment value of the game has never been better."

Chicago's quest is to be the first team to repeat since the Detroit Red Wings did in 1998 would certainly add to the notion that the Blackhawks are a dynasty. Star Patrick Kane is part of a sexual-assault investigation near his hometown of Buffalo, New York, but he said Thursday he expects to be exonerated and play this season.

Here are some things to watch when the Blackhawks and everyone else hit the ice as training camps begin:

3-On-3 overtime: While ending tie games with shootouts may appeal to some fans, hockey purists hate that a skills competition gives teams an extra point. A possible solution is coming this season with 5-minute, sudden-death overtimes that will have three skaters, instead of four, plus goaltenders. To give players, coaches and officials a feel for

the new format, 45 preseason games will end with the 3-on-3 situation after regulation, no matter what the score is, and there will be no shootout.

Eyes in the dky: The NHL plans to have trained concussion spotters at every game this season for the first time. Teams have had spotters in the past, but have sometimes found it difficult to line them up on the road. Bettman has said a lawsuit filed by former players against the league regarding head trauma is "without merit."

Hi, my name is ... : The Pittsburgh Penguins, who have struggled to sustain success since winning the Cup in 2009, made a bold move by acquiring high-scoring winger Phil Kessel from Toronto in a trade on the first day of free agency back in July. St. Louis sent center T.J. Oshie to Washington. Team chemistry will be a priority as practices get under way.

Young guns: A pair of 18-year-old players regarded as once-in-a-generation players, Edmonton's Connor McDavid and Buffalo's Jack Eichel, will get a chance to show to show what they can do. The Oilers drafted McDavid No. 1 overall this year and the Sabres selected Eichel one pick later.

New coaches, new places: The Toronto Maple Leafs made perhaps the biggest move of the offseason, luring coach Mike Babcock away from Detroit with a \$50 million, eight-year deal in an attempt to restore luster to the franchise. The Red Wing replaced their Stanley Cup-winning coach by promoting Jeff Blashill from their AHL team. Buffalo is putting Dan Bylsma, a former Pittsburgh coach, back on the bench and ex-San Jose coach Todd McLellan landed in Edmonton.

Is that a challenge?: NHL coaches can

now challenge goals they think were affected by goalie interference or by a player being offside.

The great outdoors: The league will put three games in the elements this season. Boston will host Montreal at Gillette Stadium, home of the New England Patriots, on New Year's Day. Minnesota will face Chicago on Feb. 21 at the University of Minnesota football stadium and less than a week later, Colorado will host Detroit at the home of the Rockies. "Any suggestion that it is overdone is from people who haven't been to the outdoor games," Bettman said.

Hurry up and wait: The NHL is moving ahead in its expansion process with Las Vegas and Quebec City. Bettman insisted the league isn't close to making "hard decisions" and won't anytime soon. "We're not feeling any timeline pressure," he said.

Cashing in: Tampa Bay Lightning center Steven Stamkos, Kings center Anze Kopitar and Chicago defenseman Brent Seabrook are among potential free agents next summer, giving each of them an added incentive to perform and their teams another reason to worry about how to fit them in under the salary cap.

More motivation: The World Cup of Hockey will be played a year from now in Toronto and rosters for the eight-team tournament will begin to take shape publicly in March. While some players such as Sidney Crosby are a lock to participate, there are a lot of players on the bubble to represent their country — or continent in the case of the 23-and-under North American team and the squad representing various European countries.

Hawks' Kane expects to be exonerated

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Speaking publicly for the first time since he became the subject of a sexual assault investigation, Chicago Blackhawks star Patrick Kane said Thursday he has done nothing wrong and expects to be exonerated.

Kane is accused of assaulting a woman in her 20s in August at his offseason home outside Buffalo, N.Y., a person familiar with the investigation told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because police have not revealed details of the case.

Kane has not been charged, but the investigation has shadowed the Stanley Cup champions for weeks as they prepare for a season that begins at home on Oct. 7.

"I cannot apologize enough for the distraction this has caused my family, teammates, this incredible organization and, of course, our fans," said Kane, who was joined at a table by Blackhawks President John McDonough, general manager Stan Bowman and coach Joel Quenneville. "While I have too much respect for the legal process to comment on an ongoing matter, I am confident once all the facts are brought to light I will be absolved of having done (anything) wrong."

Appearing calm and poised, Kane then deflected several questions that got anywhere close to the ongoing investigation. Asked about the decision to join the team for training camp, possible reaction from disappointed fans and whether he plans to stop drinking, the answer was mostly the same.

"I know you guys have a lot of questions," Kane said at one point. "I'd love to answer the questions. I'd love to answer them. I'd love to get in front of them and face them. This just isn't the right time to do it with my respect, the Blackhawks' respect for the legal process and what's going on, I really can't comment about that right now."

Kane's flashy skills and postseason success have made one of the NHL's most recognizable stars, but he also has generated his share of negative headlines over the years. He was arrested after an altercation with a cab driver in Buffalo in the summer of 2009. A few years later, photos posted on the Internet showed him partying in Madison, Wisconsin.

The decision to allow him to report to training camp was met with some pointed criticism for a franchise long regarded as one of the smartest organizations in sports.

"We recognize that Patrick Kane is dealing with a very serious situation," McDonough said. "Based on our discussions with his legal representatives who are very close to this matter, we have decided to have Patrick join us for training camp here at the University of Notre Dame."

Asked if the team had talked to law enforcement or the accuser's attorney, McDonough said he didn't know who else they had contacted.

"I would imagine it's been thorough and comprehensive. But I do know we were in touch with them," he said, referring to Kane's representatives.

A message was left Thursday seeking comment from Erie County district attorney Frank Sedita.

Kane who turns 27 in November, was playing at an MVP-caliber level last season before breaking his collarbone in February. But the No. 1 overall pick in the 2007 draft returned in time for the playoffs, helping the Blackhawks to their third Stanley Cup title in six seasons.

Rangers complete sweep of Astros

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Shin-Soo Choo talked about the veterans on the Texas Rangers, and their collective experience in big games.

"That's what showed the last four games," he said.

Mitch Moreland hit a three-run homer and Colby Lewis, another holdover from the Rangers' two World Series teams, pitched six innings for his 16th victory as the Rangers beat Houston 8-2 on Thursday night to complete a four-game sweep that put them in the AL West lead.

The Rangers (79-67) entered the series trailing Houston by 1½ games, but now lead by 2½ with 16 remaining.

"I believe that our ballclub was as focused, as determined, as locked in as we could be for a four-game set, and especially where we were," said manager Jeff Banister, who was then asked what he likes best about how his team is playing. "The energy, the passion, the grit. These guys, they're here to play."

Houston (77-70) had been alone atop the AL West for 49 consecutive days until losing Tuesday night. The Astros finished a 2-8 trip but stayed 1½ games ahead of Minnesota for the second wild card after the Twins lost 11-8 to the Angels. Los Angeles is 2½ games back, and plays in Houston next week.

"It's difficult to absorb these losses when we've put so much time and energy in," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "Obviously, we feel pretty bad about the way these four games went. It's nothing that a good win can't overcome."

The Astros play Oakland on Friday, the first of nine games on their final homestand of the regular season. They have the AL's best home record at 48-24.

Cubs 9, Pirates 6: Anthony Rizzo started a six-run fifth inning with his 30th homer, and Chicago defeated Pittsburgh to take three of four in an important series between National League playoff contenders.

Pirates rookie shortstop Jung Ho Kang is out six to eight months after breaking his left leg and injuring his knee in the first inning when Chris Coghlan slid into him while trying to break up a double play.

The Cubs moved within two games of Pittsburgh for the top wild card spot in the playoffs. The Pirates trail first-place St. Louis by five games in the NL Central division.

Angels 11, Twins 8: Mike Trout hit a grand slam and a solo shot to set a career high for home runs in a season with 38, and Los Angeles beat host Minnesota.

The reigning AL Most Valuable Player's grand slam in the second inning erased most of an early 5-0 deficit, and he led off the fourth with his second homer of the game.

Cardinals 6, Brewers 3: John Lackey pitched seven shutout innings as visiting St. Louis beat Milwaukee in a game delayed after Brewers pitcher Jimmy Nelson was hit in the head by a line drive.

The Cardinals swept the three-game series to extend their winning streak to four.

Blue Jays 5, Braves 0: Marco Estrada combined with Roberto Osuna on a three-hitter, and Toronto blanked host Atlanta

to extend its lead in the AL East.

Cliff Pennington, Edwin Encarnacion and Josh Donaldson homered for the Blue Jays, who lead the New York Yankees by 3½ games. Toronto won two of three for its first series win over the Braves since 2008.

Royals 8, Indians 4: Omar Infante drove in a career-high seven runs as visiting Kansas City overcame some early sloppiness against Cleveland.

Yordana Ventura (12-8) went five innings, retiring struggling All-Star Jason Kipnis with the bases loaded to end the fifth as the AL Central-leading Royals, who had three errors in the first three innings and four overall, split the four-game series. Kansas City won for just the fourth time in 13 games.

Marlins 6, Nationals 4: Justin Bour and Martin Prado homered for the second straight game, and Miami dented host Washington's fading playoff hopes.

The Nationals, opening their 11-game final homestand, fell eight games behind the first-place New York Mets in the NL East.

Orioles 4, Rays 3: Adam Jones hit a go-ahead, two-run single with two outs in a four-run eighth inning as visiting Baltimore topped Tampa Bay.

Baltimore moved within 4½ games of Houston for the second AL playoff wild card.

Athletics 4, White Sox 2: Billy Butler hit a three-run homer in the ninth inning off David Robertson as Oakland rallied to beat host Chicago.