

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Trump threatens to destroy N. Korea

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — President Donald Trump, in a combative debut speech to the U.N. General Assembly, threatened the “total destruction” of North Korea if it does not abandon its drive toward nuclear weapons.

Trump, who has ramped up his rhetoric throughout the escalating crisis with North Korea, told the murmuring crowd at the U.N. on Tuesday that “it is far past time for the nations of the world to confront” Kim Jong Un and said that Kim’s “reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons” poses a threat to “the entire world with an unthinkable loss of human life.”

“Rocket man is on a suicide mission for himself and his regime,” Trump said about the North Korean leader. He said of the U.S.: “If it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.”

Elected on the nationalist slogan “America First,” Trump argued that individual nations should act in their own self-interest yet rally together when faced with a common threat.

Using bellicose language rare for a U.S. president at the rostrum of the United Nations, Trump touched upon hot spots around the globe, declaring, “The scourge of our planet is a group of rogue regimes.”

He urged nations to join together to stop Iran’s nuclear program — he declared the deal to restrain it an “embarrassment” for the United States — and defeat “loser terrorists” who have struck violence across the globe. He denounced “radical Islamic terrorism,” the inflammatory label he has recently shied away from. He warned that some violence-plagued portions of the world “are going to hell.” And he made little mention of Russia.

North Korea drew most of Trump’s attention and anger.

Trump, who has previously warned of “fire and fury” if Pyongyang does not back down, claimed that “no one has shown more contempt for other nations and for the well-being of their own people than the depraved regime in North Korea.” And he scolded nations that it was “an outrage” to enable and trade with North Korea, seeming to slight China, though he did not mention it by name.

Addressing the General Assembly is a milestone moment for any president, but one particularly significant for Trump, a relative newcomer to foreign policy who has at times rattled the international community with his unpredictability. He has pulled the United States out of multinational agreements, considered shrinking the U.S. military presence in the world and deployed bombastic language on North Korea that has been criticized by other world leaders.

Trump frequently belittled the U.N. as a candidate, and some within his White House believe the U.N. acts as a global bureaucracy that infringes on the sovereignty of individual countries. He urged the world leaders to embrace their own “national sovereignty to do more to ensure the prosperity and security of their own countries.”

But the president stood before world leaders and a global audience and declared that U.N. members, acting as a collection of self-interested nations, should unite to confront global dangers.

“I will always put America first. Just like you, the leaders of your countries, should and always put your countries first,” said Trump, who assured the U.N. that the United States would not abdicate its leadership position in the world but needed other countries to contribute more.

Lawmakers grill Navy officials on collisions, sailors’ deaths

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A row of grieving families looked on Tuesday morning as top Navy officials faced a chorus of frustrated senators during a congressional hearing to examine what led to two ship crashes that killed 17 sailors.

“We have a problem in the Navy,” Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer acknowledged during his first testimony on Capitol Hill addressing the crashes. “We are going to fix it.”

In more than two hours of testimony, Navy officials assured the Senate Armed Services Committee that they are taking action to safeguard their sail-

ors from more crashes. Among those efforts, the Navy is making immediate procedural adjustments as well as conducting several ongoing investigations, they said.

Spencer and Adm. John Richardson, the chief of naval operations, were there Tuesday to account for the Navy’s troubled year at sea. The service has seen four significant mishaps this year, including two separate ship collisions of the USS Fitzgerald in June and the USS John S. McCain in August that killed 17 sailors.

“How can this possibly happen?” Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, asked of the deadly collisions.

It was the second public meet-

ing between top Navy officials and congressional members on Capitol Hill this month.

Among the attendees at both hearings was Rachel Eckels, the mother of Petty Officer 2nd Class Timothy Thomas Eckels Jr. Her son was one of 10 sailors killed in the McCain crash on Aug. 21. “We just want answers,” Eckels said ahead of Tuesday’s hearing.

In a report presented during the House hearing, the Government Accountability Office, a federal watchdog agency, said the Navy has been woefully behind on addressing a long list of outstanding and urgent readiness issues.

On Tuesday, Sen. John Mc-

Cain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, acknowledged there are likely a series of contributing factors to the crashes, including defense funding cutbacks forcing servicemembers to do more with less.

“This is troubling,” McCain said in his opening remarks. “This is unacceptable.”

Among GAO concerns cited in its report, the agency highlighted an increase in the number of ships based overseas without current certifications; crew size reductions that have contributed to overworked sailors; and a possible increase in safety risks, as well as an inability to complete maintenance on time.

Trump wants huge military parade July 4

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's trip to France for the country's Bastille Day parade in July left a big impression. So big, in fact, that he wants to replicate the experience back home.

As Trump met with French President Emmanuel Macron, Trump gushed about seeing France's military might on display in Paris during his visit. And he told reporters that he is looking into the possibility of having the parade down the streets of Washington on Independence Day to show the U.S. "military strength."

"I was your guest at Bastille Day, and it was one of the greatest parades I've ever seen," Trump told Macron, who sat next to him. "It was two hours on the button, and it was military might, and I think a tremendous thing for France and the spirit of France."

"To a large extent because of what I witnessed, we may do something like that on July Fourth in Washington down Pennsylvania Avenue," he said.

The comments prompted laughter from Macron and other officials sitting around them. The leaders were meeting in New York ahead of the U.N. General Assembly. But it isn't the first time that Trump has talked about wanting a military parade in the streets of Washington.

Trump officials asked the Pentagon about having armored vehicles participate in his inauguration parade, according to documents obtained by HuffPost. And he told The Washington Post in January that he hoped that during his tenure, the U.S.' military might would be on display.

"Being a great president has to do with a lot of things, but one of them is being a great cheerleader for the country," Trump said in January. "And we're going to show the people as we build up our military, we're going to display our military."

Mattis confirms DOD sending 3,000 more GIs to Afghanistan

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will send more than 3,000 new troops to Afghanistan as part of President Donald Trump's new strategy for the 16-year war, but the Defense Department will not provide specific details about those upcoming deployments, Secretary Jim Mattis said Monday.

Most of the troops who will soon deploy to the longest war in U.S. history have been notified, and some of them already have departed for Afghanistan, Mattis told reporters at the Pentagon. He added that he soon expects to sign the last of the orders sending new troops into the conflict.

The boost in troops is in line with the number suggested privately by defense officials for several months. Though Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and other south

Asia nations in a speech Aug. 21, Monday was the first time Mattis confirmed publicly he would deploy more than 3,000 troops.

He warned reporters not to expect much additional information about those servicemembers' operations, citing Trump's pledge not to talk about specifics.

"The president has been very clear that we are not going to broadcast to the enemy how many (troops) are going [and] where exactly they are going," Mattis said. "You know they are shifting to an even stronger train, advise, assist effort. I think that's plenty of transparency so that the American people know what we are doing, approximately how much of a troop commitment it is."

The boost will bring troop strength to about 14,000 American servicemembers operating in Afghanistan under the United States' two-fold mission there — the NATO-led operation to

train and advise Afghan forces and a unilateral counterterrorism mission.

It marks the first time that the United States has increased its military force in Afghanistan since former President Barack Obama began drawing down its force in that country in 2011, when some 100,000 American troops were fighting there.

Most of the new troops — as well as a few thousand additional troops from NATO countries — will be focused primarily on assisting Afghan forces in their war with the Taliban. Top American officials, including Army Gen. John Nicholson, the top military commander in Afghanistan, have characterized the war with the Islamic insurgent group as a stalemate. Some of the new troops, however, will bolster the counterterrorism mission, which includes direct combat operations against Islamic State fighters and remnants of al-Qaida.

Senate OKs bill pumping \$700B into military

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate has overwhelmingly approved a sweeping defense policy bill that would pump \$700 billion into the military, putting the U.S. armed forces on track for a budget greater than at any time during the decade-plus wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Senators passed the legislation by an 89-8 vote Monday. It authorizes \$700 billion in military spending for the budget year that begins Oct. 1, expands U.S. missile defenses in response to North Korea's growing hostility and refuses to allow excess bases to close.

The 1,215-page measure defies a number of White House objections, but President Donald Trump hasn't threatened

to veto it. The bill helps him honor a pledge to rebuild an American military that he said had become depleted on former President Barack Obama's watch.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and other national security hawks have insisted the military branches are at risk of losing their edge in combat without a dramatic influx of money to repair shortfalls in training and equipment. He said the rash of training accidents and crashes — since mid-July, nearly 100 servicemembers have been killed or injured in close to a dozen incidents — can be linked to the budget cuts. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said senior military leaders are taking a close look at whether strict budget constraints are to blame.

Approved by the Armed Services Committee by a 27-0 vote in late June, the overall Senate bill provides \$640 billion for core Pentagon operations, such as buying weapons and paying troops, and another \$60 billion for wartime missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Trump's budget request sought \$603 billion for basic functions and \$65 billion for overseas missions.

Despite the push for the additional billions in military spending, major hurdles need to be cleared. Lawmakers will have to work out a deal that lifts the caps on federal agency budgets, including the Pentagon's, mandated by a 2011 law. Congress has passed temporary relief before, but senior military officials have urged that the law be repealed altogether.

GOP faces hurdles with latest effort to repeal 'Obamacare'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Top Senate Republicans say their last-ditch push to uproot former President Barack Obama's health care law is gaining momentum. But they have less than two weeks to succeed and face a tough fight to win enough GOP support to reverse the summer's self-inflicted defeat on the party's high-priority issue.

"We feel pretty good about it," Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., a leader of the effort along with Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Monday.

"He's the grave robber," No. 3 Senate GOP leader John Thune, of South Dakota, said of Cassidy. "This thing was 6 feet under" but now has "a lot of very positive buzz," Thune said.

The 140-page bill would replace much of Obama's Affordable Care Act with block grants to states, giving them wide leeway on spending the money,

and would cut and reshape Medicaid. It would let states set their own coverage health requirements, allow insurers to boost premiums on people with serious medical conditions and end Obama's mandates that most Americans buy insurance and that companies offer coverage to workers.

With Democrats unanimously against the bill, Republicans commanding the Senate 52-48 would lose if just three GOP senators are opposed. That proved a bridge too far in July, when three attempts to pass similar measures fell short and delivered an embarrassing defeat to President Donald Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

McConnell said he would not bring another alternative to the Senate floor unless he knew he had the 50 votes needed. Vice President Mike Pence would cast the tie-breaking vote.

For Senate Republican leaders, a victory would allow them

to claim redemption on their "repeal and replace" effort. The House approved its version of the bill in May.

Democrats backed by doctors, hospitals and patients' groups mustered an all-out effort to smother the GOP drive, warning of millions losing coverage and others facing skimpier policies.

Potentially complicating the GOP drive, the Congressional Budget Office said it won't have crucial estimates on the bill's impact on coverage ready for several weeks.

Special procedures protecting the GOP bill from filibusters — which take 60 votes to block — expire Sept. 30, and after that, Democratic opposition would guarantee its defeat. Some wavering Republican senators could want the non-partisan budget office's analysis before feeling comfortable about the measure's impact back home.

Ex-postal worker charged with fraud

Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. — A former postal worker who had claimed a wrist injury prevented him from working posted photos of himself zip-lining and rappelling, state authorities said Monday as they announced insurance fraud and theft charges.

Robert McGeehan, of Lower Township, is accused of stealing more than \$75,000 in federal workers' compensation benefits by falsely claiming an on-the-job fall rendered him medically unfit to work as a letter carrier.

Postal service investigators said they also recorded him doing strenuous yard work, including using a chain saw and a hand saw and throwing large logs.

McGeehan, 59, injured his wrist in February 2008 when he slipped on ice.

He had arthroscopic surgery seven months later and eventually was deemed fit for light duty, but he disputed that finding and turned down several offers of less physically demanding positions within the postal service, authorities said.

To corroborate his workers' compensation claim, McGeehan has consistently submitted examination findings by his personal doctor, authorities said.

McGeehan posted the vacation photos in July 2015. While traveling, authorities said he left an electronic signature on an agreement to accept risks and waive liabilities for certain activities, including "zip lines, rope swings, cargo net traverses, mechanical rappels and climbing."

He faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted on both counts, authorities said.

Protesters chant outside jail in St. Louis; no new vandalism

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Protesters chanting "free our people" gathered outside the jail in downtown St. Louis for more than two hours to show solidarity with those arrested during demonstrations that turned ugly over the weekend, but there was no new vandalism overnight.

Demonstrators outside the jail late Monday criticized authorities for keeping some of those arrested in jail for nearly 24 hours after they were taken into custody. Police said more than 120 people were arrested during Sunday's protests over the acquittal of a white former police officer in the killing of a black suspect.

Some of those jailed were released Monday evening before organizers announced an end to the demonstration and told people to go home. Organizers said protests would resume Tuesday but they gave no details. Monday was the fourth day of protests.

Three days of peaceful protests and three nights of vandalism followed Friday's announcement that a judge found ex-officer Jason Stockley not guilty in the 2011 death of Anthony Lamar Smith.

Smith's mother, Anne Smith, was among those gathered outside the downtown jail Monday.

Hundreds of riot police mobilized downtown late Sunday, arresting more than 80 people

at one intersection after police said they didn't follow orders to disperse. Earlier, police had responded to reports of property damage and vandalism.

Sean Porter, 25, of St. Louis, was among those arrested at the intersection. He said they could not follow orders to disperse because police had them blocked in.

"They threw us on the ground, sprayed us, hit us, everything. It's tragic," said Porter, who was released from jail Monday evening. He was charged with failure to disperse.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch said reporter Mike Faulk, who was on the street covering the protests, had an experience similar to the one Porter described.

Maria 'devastates' Dominica

Associated Press

ROSEAU, Dominica — Hurricane Maria smashed into Dominica with 160 mph winds, ripping the roof off even the prime minister's residence and causing what he called "mind-boggling" devastation Tuesday as it plunged into a Caribbean region already ravaged by Hurricane Irma.

The storm was on a track to wallop Puerto Rico on Wednesday "with a force and violence that we haven't seen for several generations," the territory's governor said.

Dominica Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit said on his Facebook page that "initial reports are of widespread devastation" and said he feared there would be deaths due to rain-fed landslides.

Maria's eye roared over the island late Monday night. The storm briefly dipped to Category 4 strength early Tuesday before regaining Category 5 status.

Fierce winds and rain lashed mountainous Dominica for hours. A police official on the island, Inspector Pellam Jno Baptiste, said late Monday night that there were no immediate reports of casualties but it was too dangerous for officers to check conditions.

On the nearby island of Martinique, officials said about 25,000 households were without electricity and two small towns without water after Maria roared past.

The head of French civil security, Jacques Witkowski, told reporters that it was too soon to say whether the French department of Guadeloupe had fared as well.

Prefect Eric Maire, the highest French official of Guadeloupe, said in a video on Twitter that some roads and homes were flooded and heavy rain was expected to continue. He told the population to "remain inside."

Authorities in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, which faced

the possibility of a direct hit, warned that people in wooden or flimsy homes should find safe shelter before the storm's expected arrival there on Wednesday.

"You have to evacuate. Otherwise, you're going to die," said Hector Pesquera, the island's public safety commissioner. "I don't know how to make this any clearer."

In neighboring Puerto Rico, nearly 70,000 people were still without power following their earlier brush with Irma and nearly 200 remained in shelters as Maria approached.

Gov. Ricardo Rossello said Puerto Rico had 500 shelters capable of taking in up to 133,000 people in a worst-case scenario. He also said the Federal Emergency Management Agency was ready to bring drinking water and help restore power immediately after the storm, which could hit as a Category 5 hurricane.

Residents in SW Fla. clear homes in the heat

Associated Press

EVERGLADES CITY, Fla. — Dealing with wrecked belongings and reports of toxic muck, residents of a tiny town where Florida's Everglades meet the Gulf of Mexico cleared their homes Monday in scorching 92-degree heat with no air conditioning and no electricity except from a few generators.

The isolated Everglades City community of about 400 people suffered some of Florida's worst storm surges — up to 9 feet — when Hurricane Irma slammed the region eight days ago, leaving the insides of homes a sodden mess and caking the streets with mud. The storm affected nearly every part of the state, and more than two dozen people were killed.

The post-storm death of a man in the nearby hamlet of Ochopee from an infected wound after walking through mud alarmed residents and prompted Florida's Health Department to tweet Sunday that rumors of spreading flesh-eating bacteria were false. Collier County said authorities were testing stormwater, and state health officials have offered vaccinations while investigating reports of infections.

The state's emergency management division reported Monday that more than 407,000 homes and businesses were still without electricity.

Several Everglades City residents said they needed generators and complained that the Federal Emergency Management Agency had not done much yet beyond taking applications for aid.

FEMA said the agency has supplied Florida with 73 generators, among other aid, but it's up to state officials to distribute them.

Regional administrator Gracia Szechsch said the agency's job was not to provide cleanup trucks but to reimburse the state for its work and to help individuals with houses.

Report: Russian helo accidentally fires on spectators during drills

The Washington Post

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — Russian media reported Tuesday that three people were wounded at major Russian military exercises when a helicopter accidentally fired a rocket at a crowd of invited spectators.

The Russian Defense Ministry dismissed the report as a "purposeful provocation or someone's personal stupidity."

The state-owned NTV television station cited what it described as an official report detailing the Sunday incident involving a state-of-the-art Ka-52 attack helicopter. The report said that the spectators were not seriously injured and that two cars were also destroyed.

The report gave no other details on the civilians purported to be injured. Journalists, veterans' groups and other were allowed to watch portions of the Russian war games.

Earlier, the news site 66.ru reported that two spectators had been hospitalized with serious injuries. Both reports included a video purportedly showing the incident, which they said happened at an exercise at a firing range near St. Petersburg during the war games, known as Zapad 2017.

The Defense Ministry denial cited Sept. 18, a different day than the claimed incident in the

NTV report. The reason for the discrepancy was not immediately clear.

"No incidents involving army aviation happened in playing an episode of practical actions during the Zapad 2017 strategic exercise on Sept. 18," said the Western Military District press service, which is affiliated with the Defense Ministry.

The military report cited by NTV said that on Sept. 16 a lieutenant colonel and a senior lieutenant carried out a sortie at 2:47 p.m. from an aerodrome to practice live-fire combat exercises.

The report said a C-8 rocket was fired accidentally while the Ka-52 helicopter was traveling at 120 mph at an altitude of 150 feet.

On Monday, a large crowd of military observers and more than 100 journalists, including The Washington Post, were present at the exercises, along with President Vladimir Putin. The 45-minute simulated battle went off without incident.

Moscow has insisted that the exercises, which are held every four years, would rehearse a strictly defensive scenario and involve no more than 12,700 troops, just below the level that would require Russia to allow NATO observers under an international agreement. NATO leaders have said that the exercise may actually involve up to 100,000 troops.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Boy, 5, drives jet ski onto beach; 1 hurt

IN MICHIGAN CITY — Authorities said a 5-year-old boy started a jet ski along a Lake Michigan beach in northwestern Indiana and it ran onto shore and hurt a woman.

Indiana Conservation officers said the boy's father was helping another jet-ski operator with mechanical troubles Saturday afternoon at Michigan City Beach when the boy climbed on the jet ski and pushed the ignition button. The boy became scared and turned the throttle as he grabbed onto the handlebars.

Officials said the jet ski ran onto the beach and hit a 60-year-old Mishawka woman as she sat in a lawn chair about 30 feet from the water's edge. The woman suffered a serious foot injury and was taken to a hospital for treatment.

Shots fired after man in mask chases daughter

OH YOUNGSTOWN — An Ohio man was charged after chasing his 6-year-old daughter around a neighborhood while wearing a clown mask, and another man is charged for firing a gun.

Police said the girl first jumped into a stranger's car and then ran into a stranger's apartment while screaming that a clown was chasing her in northeast Ohio's Boardman Township on Saturday night. Police said a man in the apartment building came outside and fired a gunshot into the ground.

The father told police he chased his daughter to discipline her for behavioral issues instead of spanking her. He's been charged with child endangering and inducing panic. Police said the man who fired

the gunshot has been charged with using weapons while intoxicated.

Dog that disappeared in Fla. found states away

NY FREEPORT — A dog that disappeared in Florida in February 2016 has been found in New York.

Newsday said a woman found the stray, a German shepherd mix, and took it to a Long Island rescue group called Bobbi and The Strays on Tuesday. The dog's microchip was traced to West Palm Beach, Fla.

Rick Moneck said his family adopted the "beautiful" and "well-behaved" dog, named Relay, as a puppy in 2014. When Relay went under the backyard fence, the family searched for months. Moneck said a gas station video appeared to show a man putting Relay into his car.

The shelter's looking for a volunteer to drive Relay to Florida.

Teacher educates on sex assault through rap

KS KANSAS CITY — A Kansas high school teacher is educating his students about sexual assault by rapping about it.

The Kansas City Star reported that David Muhammad's song "Fallen" was released Sept. 5. The social studies teacher wrote the song under the name "Brotha Newz." The song is inspired by things that trouble Muhammad about the way society talks about and addresses sexual violence.

Reports of two sexual assaults at Shawnee Mission East shook the school community at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year. One of the victims was Muhammad's student, prompting him to want to speak more about preventing sexual assault.

Festival celebrates toy cameras' lo-fi joys

MA SOMERVILLE — In an era of iPhones and digital selfies, some photographers are celebrating the lowest of lo-fi technology: the toy camera.

The Somerville Toy Camera Festival features photos taken on all manner of toy cameras — from the classic Holga and Diana to the lensless pinhole, the most primitive of primitive cameras. The goal is to turn what at first seems like limitations into possibilities — the use of double exposures and the graininess of film.

Driver killed when his pickup truck hits cow

UT FAIRVIEW — Authorities said a Fairview man died after his car hit a cow in the road.

Utah Highway Patrol officials said Randall Hill, 60, was driving on state Route 89 a few miles north of Fairview about 5 p.m. Saturday when his pickup truck struck the black cow. They said visibility was low at the time due to heavy fog.

The truck ran off the roadway after it hit the cow, which also died at the scene. Highway patrol officials said Hill's truck rolled over a fence and hit a power pole.

Teen preparing for Rubik's Cube contest

GA MACON — A Georgia teenager is putting in two hours of practice a day to prepare for his first Rubik's Cube competition.

Hassan Harclerode Jr. is a 10th-grader at Central High School in Macon. After buying his first Rubik's Cube on Amazon two months ago, he has whittled his time solving the puzzle from two hours to an

average of 40 seconds. He plans to compete Sunday in his first competition in Marietta.

He'll likely need a bit more practice: The world record for solving a Rubik's Cube currently stands at 4.74 seconds.

Cops: Man breaks into home to drink beer

PA STEWARTSTOWN — Police said a drunken Pennsylvania man who didn't want to drink alone forced his way into a woman's home and sat down with two 12 packs of beer.

Sean Haller, 39, of Stewartstown, remained in the York County jail Monday, unable to post bail on charges including criminal trespass for the Sept. 12 incident. Southern Regional police said a woman called them to report Haller had entered her home shortly after 10 p.m. and refused to leave. Police said Haller had done the same thing in another woman's home a short time earlier.

Police found Haller in the second woman's home and said he refused to leave so officers had to go in and get him. He faces a preliminary hearing Nov. 1.

Chili festival ends due to being too popular

MO LUPUS — After 36 years, the tiny central Missouri village of Lupus is calling off its annual chili festival because it's become too popular.

In recent years, the Lupus Chili Fest has drawn thousands to the Moniteau County town of about 30 people. The Columbia Missourian reported festival organizers announced last week that this year's event was canceled because the village couldn't handle the anticipated crowds.

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MLB poised to smash home run record

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Giancarlo Stanton's smacks, Aaron Judge's jolts and all those dizzying long balls helped Major League Baseball move another poke closer to the inevitable.

Nearly two decades after the height of the Steroids Era, the sport is on track to break its season record for home runs on Tuesday — and not just top the old mark, but smash it like one of those upper-deck shots that have become commonplace in the Summer of the Slugger.

There were 5,677 home runs hit through Monday, 16 shy of the record set in 2000.

Juiced balls? Watered-down pitching? Stanton's renaissance? Sensational starts by Judge and Cody Bellinger?

"I don't think that we are ever going to have a single explanation for exactly why we've see so many," baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "But players are bigger and stronger. They're playing a little differ-

ently, in terms of the way they swing. Pitchers throw harder. The one thing I remain comfortable with: Nothing about the baseball, according to our testing, is materially different."

There were 5,610 homers last year, an average of 2.31 per game, and this year's average of 2.53 projects to 6,139. That would be up 47 percent from 4,186 in 2014.

In just three years, home runs will have increased by 1,953 — an extra 149 miles of long balls at this year's average home run length of 400 feet, or 15 miles more than the driving distance between Philadelphia's Citizen's Bank Park and Washington's Nationals Park.

"The game has changed," New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi said. "From when I started, there's a lot less stolen bases, there's a lot less bunting, there's a lot less hitting-and-running. You don't give outs away, and you let guys swing the bat."

Already 108 players have hit

20 homers this year, just two shy of the record set last season — and up from 64 in 2015, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

"The ball seems to soar from people that are hitting it farther than maybe they did a year ago ... and they kind of look like the same person," Minnesota manager Paul Molitor, a Hall of Famer hitter, said before Monday's game at Yankee Stadium.

Along with sailing shots come strikeouts, which will set a record for the 10th consecutive year. There were 37,083 whiffs through Monday, an average of 8.25 per team per game that translates to 40,103 over the full season.

"The focus is hitting homers and tolerating strikeouts," Reggie Jackson said. "I don't really like all the strikeouts, and I was the king."

Baseball officials are worried about decreasing action and have been alarmed by the strikeout rise. This year's total is up from 38,982 last year and

headed to an increase of nearly 8,000 from the 32,189 in 2007. The strikeout spike coincides with a rise in fastball velocity; four-seamers have averaged 93.2 mph, up from 91.9 mph in 2008, according to MLB data.

"These bullpens are making it extremely difficult. From basically the starter on you're going to have elite, hard-throwing guys that are looking to strike you out every single time," said Baltimore's Mark Trumbo, last year's home run champion. "The game right now is as max effort as I've seen it. Guys are throwing harder. At the plate sometimes you have no choice. It's hard to steer the ball around when it's 98 miles an hour and up in the zone."

Jackson set a record with 2,597 career strikeouts, maxing at 171 in 1968. Six players already have reached 171 this year, led by the Yankees' Judge at 198. He could break Mark Reynolds' season record of 223, set in 2009.

Roundup

Kershaw gives up first grand slam in loss

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Through 10 seasons, 287 starts and more than 1,900 innings, Clayton Kershaw had never given up a grand slam. Until Monday night.

Aaron Altherr hit his second career grand slam, a 418-foot blast to left off Kershaw in the sixth, to lead the Philadelphia Phillies past the Los Angeles Dodgers and their ace, 4-3.

"We had the lead, and I blew it," Kershaw said.

Chris Taylor and Justin Turner led off the game with consecutive homers and Curtis Granderson also went deep for the Dodgers, who opened play with a magic number of four to clinch the NL West. At 96-54, Los Angeles still has the best record in baseball.

The Phillies have been a thorn in the side of Kershaw (17-4). The Dodgers' ace left-hander dropped to 3-5 in his career versus Philadelphia, one of just three teams he has a losing record against.

"You try to make it just another game,

but it's really not," Altherr said. "He's a future Hall of Famer, so it's definitely awesome to play against him."

The three-time NL Cy Young Award winner was cruising until the sixth, when he allowed a bloop single by Freddy Galvis between a pair of walks to load the bases for Altherr. The Phillies outfielder crushed Kershaw's 1-1 breaking ball to give Philadelphia a 4-2 advantage.

"Obviously, it was pretty special," Altherr said. "Thank God I was able to get a pitch to hit."

Kershaw departed after the sixth and allowed four runs on four hits with two walks and six strikeouts.

"Just bad pitches, I guess," Kershaw said. "The pitch to Altherr was a bad slider."

Kershaw dropped to 2-2 with a 3.74 ERA in four starts since returning from the DL on Sept. 1 after a 33-game absence with a lower back strain.

"He's really not quite there yet," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "His velocity is down a little, but he's getting near where he wants to be. He's still one of the best in

the game and a Cy Young candidate."

Red Sox 10, Orioles 8: Andrew Benintendi hit a two-run single in the 11th inning, Mookie Betts had four RBIs and visiting Boston beat Baltimore for its ninth win in 12 games.

Marlins 13, Mets 1: Giancarlo Stanton hit his 55th homer — and his first in nine days — while driving in four runs to help host Miami beat New York.

Padres 4, Diamondbacks 2: Hunter Renfroe hit a three-run home run in his first game back from Triple-A and Austin Hedges also connected for host San Diego, which beat NL wild card leader Arizona.

Brewers 3, Pirates 0: Brent Suter pitched five efficient innings, Ryan Braun homered for host Milwaukee.

Athletics 8, Tigers 3: Detroit reliever Jeff Ferrell left in the eighth inning after being hit in the head by a line drive off the bat of Ryon Healy measured at 102.6 mph.

Yankees 2, Twins 1: Aaron Judge hit his 44th home run, Aroldis Chapman pitched out of big trouble in the eighth and host New York increased its AL wild-card lead.

Lions stay unbeaten, keep Giants winless

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The NFL's highest-paid player has the Detroit Lions rolling into an early showdown against the defending NFC champion Atlanta Falcons.

How big can a game really be in Week 3? Well, there are only three undefeated teams left in the NFC: the Lions, the Falcons and the Carolina Panthers.

Matthew Stafford kept the Lions rolling Monday night, scrambling to frustrate the New York Giants' defense and throwing two third-down touchdown passes in a 24-10 victory.

Jamal Agnew added an 88-yard punt return TD in the fourth quarter, helping Stafford and the Lions avenge a loss here from December. Detroit even stifled star receiver Odell Beckham Jr. in his return to the Giants' lineup, setting up the matchup at home against Atlanta.

Stafford completed 15 of 21 passes for 122 yards and has six TD passes this season. He

downplayed the win's impact as a statement.

"I think that's stuff you guys like to talk about and write about," said Stafford, who threw touchdown passes of 27 yards to Marvin Jones and 7 to Eric Ebron. "For us, we're on a short week playing a Super Bowl runner-up. We'll enjoy this one for about 30 minutes and start looking at Atlanta."

Detroit got contributions from all phases. The defense sacked Eli Manning five times, with Ezekiel Ansah getting three. The special teams had the punt return and Matt Prater's 56-yard field goal that hit the upright and fell over the right way.

"I think all across the board, the guys played tough and played well against a team that's very difficult to beat," Lions coach Jim Caldwell said. "I think our guys overall did a nice job."

Caldwell said he has already started looking at Atlanta because this will be a short week.

"They're a very talented team, every explosive,"

Caldwell said. "It should be a real challenge for our guys."

Manning threw an 18-yard TD pass to rookie Evan Engram and Aldrick Rosas kicked a 25-yard field goal for New York (0-2), which is playing nothing like the team that went 11-5 last season.

Here are some takeaways from the Lions third win in as many Monday night games against the Giants:

Beckham back. Beckham caught four passes for 36 yards. He was targeted five times but he saw limited action playing for the first time since spraining his left ankle on Aug. 21. "I just think we have to get it together," Beckham said of the 0-2 start. "Stay positive. Stay with each other and just get better each and every day. We are only going to go where we take it. So, it's up to us, it's in our hands."

Sack machine. Ansah had only two sacks last season in an injury plagued year. He had had 30 sacks in his first three years. Until this week, he was only getting hurries. "The sack

looks better than a hurry," he said. "That is what I am paid to do — knock the quarterback down with the ball in his hands — and I'm just grateful I was able to get a few today."

Injuries. Lions SS Tavon Wilson left in the second half with a shoulder injury. The Giants lost starting RT Bobby Hart on the opening series. LG Justin Pugh moved to tackle and Brett Jones replaced him. The Giants also played without starters MLB B.J. Goodson (lower leg) and CB Janoris Jenkins (ankle-hand).

Woeful offense. The Giants now have gone eight straight games scoring 19 points or fewer. They have a total of 13 in two games this season. The running game had 62 yards on 18 carries, the offense had a total of 270 yards and it was 4-for-12 on third down. "We've got to score more," said Manning, who was 22-for-32 for 239 yards. "Not going in the right direction enough, going backward, not converting on third downs enough."

Cowboys' Garrett plans to have chat with Elliott

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Ezekiel Elliott was accused of quitting by Hall of Fame running back LaDainian Tomlinson in Dallas' 42-17 loss to Denver.

Cowboys coach Jason Garrett never directly disagreed Monday.

While heaping praise on quarterback Dak Prescott for continuing to show fight in his first blowout loss as a pro, Garrett said he eventually would talk to Elliott about the second-year running back twice failing to pursue a defensive back after an interception.

Garrett's comments to reporters came a few hours after his radio show, when he similarly passed on a chance to dismiss Tomlinson's criticism.

"Zeke is one of the most natural competitors I've ever been

around," Garrett said. "He loves to play. He loves to practice. I think we've seen that through his first year playing. Those two plays were not indicative of the kind of competitor that he was and we have to get that addressed."

Prescott won NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year honors and Elliott was the league's leading rusher as the dynamic pair debuted with the best record in the NFC at 13-3 before a divisional playoff loss to Green Bay.

Elliott had 15 straight games of at least 80 yards rushing and had never had fewer than 51 before he was held to 8 yards on nine carries against the ball-hawking Broncos, who made it their priority to stop Elliott and force the Cowboys to beat them with the passing of Prescott.

After getting dropped for a

5-yard loss on his first carry of the second half, Elliott had five carries for 0 yards.

"He certainly could have been frustrated," Garrett said. "Obviously he had been very productive as a running back over the course of his career and certainly in the NFL up to this point. There's no question frustration could have set in, but I have not had a conversation with him yet."

After the game, Elliott flatly rejected the notion that his mind is elsewhere with all the legal drama surrounding his six-game suspension over a domestic case in Ohio. The NFL wants a federal appeals court to overrule an injunction that blocked the suspension while the case plays out.

Elliott simply had nowhere to run, and didn't fare much better when the Cowboys tried to

throw to him on the outside. He had four catches for 14 yards.

"I feel like if he would have made some of those plays on the outside, it would have probably forced them to get in the zone more than their man coverage that they were in a majority of the night," Prescott said. "That's when our run game hits."

Tomlinson's comments didn't surface until after Elliott had appeared in the visiting locker room, where the former Ohio State star acknowledged being frustrated but said he wouldn't be discouraged.

"You can't forget about it," said Elliott, who was averaging 108 yards per game in his career before facing Denver's vaunted defense for the first time. "You've got to evaluate what happened and you got to build on it."

Can anyone stop Pens' three-peat?

BY STEPHEN WHYNO

Associated Press

Each time Seth Jones felt like the Columbus Blue Jackets were dominating, the Pittsburgh Penguins went down the ice and scored. The series was over fast.

T.J. Oshie knows the feeling because the Penguins did it to the Washington Capitals often during playoff series the past two years.

"It kind of deflates what we're doing and it's hard to trust your game after that," Oshie said.

Opportunistic, well-coached and talented, Pittsburgh has won eight consecutive playoff series to become the NHL's only back-to-back Stanley Cup champion of the salary-cap era and the first since the Detroit Red Wings in 1997 and 1998. Now everyone's trying to figure out how to stop the march of Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and the Penguins as they go for the three-peat.

"It's not one thing," Jones said. "There's not a Crosby stopper. There's not a Malkin stopper. You can't put a stop on

them. You just have to contain them."

No one has contained them so far. The Penguins mowed through the New York Rangers, Capitals, Tampa Bay Lightning and San Jose Sharks to win the Cup in 2016 and then the Blue Jackets, Capitals, Ottawa Senators and Nashville Predators in 2017, and only three of those series needed seven games.

Patrick Kane acknowledged that while he and the Chicago Blackhawks used to be the standard after winning the Cup in 2010, 2013 and 2015, the Penguins have surpassed them. While the Los Angeles Kings rivaled the Blackhawks during their heyday, the Penguins have shown to be unbeatable when it matters most.

"It seems like they're on the brink sometimes, and they find their way out of it," Kane said. "Just watching games, it's almost like you have that feeling that they're going to win, especially in playoffs. Whether that's the coaching staff or the players or just that organization, it seems like they have something pretty special going

right now."

If there are cracks in Pittsburgh's armor, they came this offseason with the losses of goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury, defenseman Trevor Daley and forwards Nick Bonino, Chris Kunitz and Matt Cullen. But Crosby, Malkin, goalie Matt Murray, winger Phil Kessel, top defenseman Kris Letang and coach Mike Sullivan remain, which explains why the Penguins are favored to win again and make it three in a row for the first time since the early 1980s New York Islanders dynasty.

"When you get Sid, Geno, Letang on the team, you always have a chance," said Fleury, who went to the Vegas Golden Knights in the expansion draft. "That's how I felt every time. When every season started I always felt like we had a chance to do great. I think they'll be dangerous again."

Usually the grind of playing over 100 games in a season wears on a team. Ryan Getzlaf, whose Anaheim Ducks won the Cup in 2007 and lost in the first round the next year, said

a team needs luck and a group that's able to sustain a high level of game through fatigue the entire next year.

Now that the Penguins have sustained to win twice, no one's betting against them doing it again.

"They're a good team, and they're going to continue to be a good team," Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere said. "They're the heavyweight champs right now, and you've just got to knock them off."

Easier said than done. Now maybe Murray will struggle with a heavier workload or the depth that Fleury said paved the way to the championships will wear thin.

But if there's a blueprint to attacking the Penguins, it might be putting pressure on their blue line.

"You have to play a physical style, but also you have to play a skill style, as well," Jones said. "You got to get to them, you got to get to the defensemen, I think and that's something that teams may focus on."

Crimson Tide gearing up for first SEC test of season

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Alabama can now officially begin its quest for a fourth straight Southeastern Conference title.

The top-ranked Crimson Tide has conquered one highly ranked team, Florida State, and produced lopsided wins over a pair of Mountain West Conference opponents. Alabama is gearing up this week for its first SEC game and true road game Saturday at Vanderbilt, which is also 3-0.

"You can kind of tell walking around the locker room, I guess you can say the season's officially here," Tide linebacker Keith Holcombe said Monday. "This is what we've all worked for. This is what you're training for back in the summer, running 110s. This is where the

season's made right here, for us to make a run."

It's time to, as Holcombe put it, "set your jaw because it's going to be a fun ride."

Alabama's SEC schedule would seem to be back loaded with closing games against No. 25 LSU, No. 17 Mississippi State and No. 15 Auburn. Alabama's first five league opponents are unranked.

But the Commodores are coming off a win over then-No. 18 Kansas State and lead the nation in scoring, total and pass defense.

Tide coach Nick Saban believes Vandy should be in the Top 25.

Since beating No. 12 Florida State in Atlanta, Alabama has produced comfortable wins over Fresno State and Colorado State at Bryant-Denny

Stadium.

Now comes SEC play, but quarterback Jalen Hurts said the mind-set needs to remain the same.

"We have to go out there and play our game like all the other games. Nothing changes," Hurts said. "Obviously we want to kind of get our mind right, I guess, because it's getting kind of real now. But the same rules apply, the same preparation applies. You have to go out there and play."

Alabama's defense is coming off a performance unsatisfactory enough that linebacker Shaun Dion Hamilton and defensive back Hootie Jones said there would be a players-only meeting. Colorado State converted 10 of 17 third down attempts and racked up nearly 400 yards in Alabama's 41-23

victory.

The Rams had two fourth-quarter touchdowns when the game seemed well in hand.

"I don't think anybody needs to be panicking," Saban said. "I think the leadership on the team is making an attempt to affect other players maybe to prepare a little better. Eliminate some of the mental errors. Play together as a unit. Communicate a little better."

"These are all things that the coaches will certainly emphasize to the players to try to help them play better. It's our responsibility to get that across. But we don't want these things to be like feel-good meetings where everybody feels good when they leave but they were concerned when they started. It could be good and bad depending on how it's handled."