

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Battered Bahamas face massive cleanup

Associated Press

FREEPORT, Bahamas — Rescue crews in the Bahamas fanned out across a blasted landscape of smashed and flooded homes Wednesday, trying to reach drenched and stunned victims of Hurricane Dorian and take the full measure of the disaster. The official death toll stood at seven but was certain to rise.

A day after the most powerful hurricane on record ever to hit the country finished mauling the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama, emergency workers had yet to reach some stricken areas.

“Right now there are just a lot of unknowns,” Parliament member Iram Lewis said. “We need help.”

Dorian, meanwhile, pushed

its way northward off the Florida shoreline with still-dangerous 105 mph winds on a course that could sideswipe Georgia and the Carolinas. An estimated 3 million people in the four states were warned to clear out, and highways leading inland were turned into one-way evacuation routes.

The storm parked over the Bahamas and pounded it for over a day and a half with winds up to 185 mph and torrential rains, swamping neighborhoods in muddy brown floodwaters and destroying or severely damaging thousands of homes.

“We are in the midst of one of the greatest national crises in our country’s history,” said Prime Minister Hubert Minnis.

National Security Minister Marvin Dames said rescue teams were fanning out as the winds and rain subsided, with more than 600 police officers and marines in Grand Bahama and 100 in Abaco.

“The devastation is unlike anything that we’ve ever seen before,” he said. “We’re beginning to get on the ground, get our people in the right places. We have a lot of work in the days and weeks and months ahead.”

Londa Sawyer stepped off a helicopter in Nassau, the capital, with her two children and two dogs on Wednesday after being rescued from Marsh Harbor in the Abaco islands.

“It looks like a bomb hit,” she said. “I’m just thankful I’m alive. The Lord saved me.”

Sawyer said that her home was completely flooded and that she and her family fled to a friend’s home, where the water came up to the second floor and carried them up to within a few feet of the roof. She said she and her children and the dogs were floating on a mattress for about half an hour until the water began receding.

Rescuers used jet skis, boats and even a bulldozer to reach children and adults trapped by the swirling waters, while the U.S. Coast Guard, Britain’s Royal Navy and disaster relief organizations tried to get food and medicine to survivors and take the most desperate people to safety. Five Coast Guard helicopters ran near-hourly flights to stricken Abaco, flying people to the main hospital in Nassau.

DOD OKs diversion of construction funds for border wall

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
AND ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Tuesday approved the transfer of \$3.6 billion of Pentagon money meant for military construction projects around the world to pay for 11 barrier construction and improvement projects on the U.S. southern border with Mexico.

The funds would build 175 miles of barrier on land owned by the Defense Department, other federal agencies and private property, senior defense officials said Tuesday. Most of that new barrier would replace either existing wall or so-called vehicular barriers, areas along the border where military vehicles have been set up as obstacles, said Kenneth Rapuano, the assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense and

global security.

The decision means the Pentagon can pull funding from as many as 127 planned construction projects that had been approved by Congress for bases in the United States and abroad to fund instead the new border projects under President Donald Trump’s February emergency declaration, said Elaine McCusker, the Pentagon’s comptroller. Contracts to build the affected projects have not yet been awarded and construction on them was not planned to start in fiscal year 2020, which begins Oct. 1, she said.

The \$3.6 billion includes two roughly equal pools of funds — overseas construction projects and projects planned for bases inside the U.S. and its territories. McCusker said the Pentagon would pull funding first from those planned overseas projects, which total \$1.8 billion.

Pentagon officials Tuesday declined to release publicly the list of projects that would be affected by the decision. Chief spokesman Jonathan Hoffman told reporters the list could be released as early as Wednesday, once lawmakers and foreign embassies are provided copies.

McCusker said the list is based on the original criteria that defense officials said they would consider when choosing from which projects to transfer funding. That criteria included not taking funds from projects for military housing, barracks or dormitories and any project contracted for construction before the end of fiscal year 2019, which is Sept. 30.

She said projects that lose funding could still move forward if Congress approves them again, a refrain defense officials have been adamant about since Trump first an-

nounced he would move Pentagon funding to pay for border barrier construction.

“If Congress were to backfill the requests none (of the projects) would be delayed,” McCusker said. “They are definitely not being canceled.”

Democrats on Capitol Hill blasted the move as using funds needed for troops to aid a political goal. Sen. Jack Reed, of Rhode Island, said Trump was attempting to take power away from Congress by moving DOD funds to pay for parts of the border wall — the building of which has been a theme of his campaign and presidency.

Hoffman argued the decision was necessary to support the roughly 5,000 troops — about 3,000 active-duty and 2,000 National Guard — now serving on the southern border in support of Customs and Border Patrol officers.

Wasp leaves Japan and 7th Fleet for new Va. homeport

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS Wasp on Wednesday left the 7th Fleet — its home for more than 1½ years — as it shifts homeports from Sasebo Naval Base in Japan to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., according to a Navy statement.

During its time in the 7th Fleet, the amphibious assault ship made history as the first to deploy with the Marine Corps' fifth-generation F-35B Lightning II stealth fighter, capable of short takeoffs and vertical landings.

The Wasp in January 2018 replaced the USS Bonhomme Richard, which spent six years in Sasebo before returning to the United States to reconfigure its flight deck to handle the new stealth fighter.

The F-35B-capable amphibious assault ship USS America,

accompanied by the amphibious transport dock USS New Orleans, will replace the Wasp at Sasebo later this year, the Navy announced.

Though its time in Sasebo was short, the Wasp participated in major exercises, including Exercise Foal Eagle 2018 with South Korea, Balikatan 2019 with the Philippines and Talisman Sabre 2019, the U.S.- and Australia-led exercise that this year included 34,000 military personnel from the U.S., Australia, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom off Australia's coast.

"What our Wasp Sailors have accomplished here over almost two years, given the operational tempo, and the nature of our multi-pronged mission, is overwhelming, and it's difficult not to constantly shine with pride," Wasp Command Master Chief Kevin Guy said in the statement.

Navy: Court should restore sexual assault conviction

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

A Marine master sergeant's sexual assault conviction that was overturned because of invalid search warrants should be reinstated, the Navy said in a filing to the nation's highest military court.

The service is asking the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces to reverse the decision that took to task field-grade officers and investigators and dismissed the master sergeant's conviction, prison sentence and dishonorable discharge. The Navy-Marine Corps appellate court found that an executive officer who signed search warrants did not have the authority to do so, making the DNA evidence that helped convict the master sergeant inadmissible.

The case involved Master

Sgt. Roberto Armendariz, of Marine Wing Support Squadron 373 at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., who was accused of sexual assault in July 2016.

The accuser, a sergeant who'd served previously with Armendariz, testified that she had gone to his office after morning physical training so he could help her, as they'd agreed, to roll her uniform blouse sleeves. She said he locked the office door, laid her on a sofa, pushed aside her shorts, took down his pants and sexually assaulted her. He stopped when she told him, "I'm not [expletive] kidding. I don't want to do this," court documents said.

A few hours later, she recounted what happened to a first sergeant who, against her wishes, called 911, the documents said.

Rand urges greater NATO intel-sharing on Russia's actions

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. should share more intelligence with allies about mischief-making during peacetime by Moscow if it wants NATO to be unified in a crisis, according to a report that examines risks to the alliance during a hypothetical conflict with Russia.

Differences among allies about the nature of the threat posed by Moscow and fears of Russian military retaliation may challenge NATO, said the report by Rand Corp., a non-profit think tank that contracts with the Defense Department.

The U.S. should start by declassifying intelligence for public release more quickly to counter denials from Moscow, particularly related to destabilizing disinformation campaigns, the report said. Dedicated training and personnel to oversee public release "might be particularly valuable if an unconventional Russian attack seems likely," it said.

NATO observers are concerned that allies would fail to agree on who is at fault or how to respond to unconventional Russian attacks, which could include meddling in elections, cyberattacks or even stirring civil unrest among Russian populations in the Baltics.

Public intelligence releases would raise awareness of what Russia is doing and could promote unity, the report said.

Another question that persists for allies, despite repeated declarations by members that NATO's commitment to the collective defense is "ironclad," is how the alliance would respond if an ally came under direct attack from Russia.

While such worries largely

disappeared in the aftermath of the Cold War, they reemerged after Russia's 2014 military intervention in Ukraine.

Public polling has since revealed a mixed picture regarding support for defending fellow members. In 2017, a poll by the Pew Foundation found that 60% of German, 55% of British and 54% of Spanish respondents opposed the use of military force to defend an ally. The U.S., Poland and the Baltics expressed a much stronger willingness to defend partners.

Public opinion would factor into political decision-making about whether to join any military response, the Rand report said. "Allies would face a stark choice between a greater risk of escalation and Russian retaliation and a desire to respond to Russian aggression," it said.

If allies failed to respond, it would amount to "a failure of the alliance's core function."

Confusing rhetoric from the U.S. about its commitment to NATO's Article 5 — the provision that states an attack on one member requires a collective response from all — could increase the risks that some allies may balk, the report said. President Donald Trump, a frequent NATO critic, has sent mixed signals about the alliance's relevance and questioned defending allies who he says "don't pay their fair share."

"Clear and consistent U.S. messaging about alliance value would be particularly critical during a crisis, when Russian information campaigns would be likely to be most active," Rand said.

Still, U.S. officials should make clear that all allies would be expected to contribute under Article 5 and that failure to do so would have consequences, the report said.

Concerns raised about US-Taliban deal

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan's government Wednesday expressed new concerns about a deal that a U.S. envoy says has been reached "in principle" with the Taliban on ending America's longest war, asking for clarifications about the agreement and its risks in order to avoid "unpleasant consequences."

The statement by presidential spokesman Sediq Seddiqi said the Afghan government shares the concerns raised by several former U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan.

The former ambassadors' joint statement Tuesday warned that a full U.S. troop withdrawal that moves too quickly and without requiring the Taliban to meet certain conditions, such as reducing violence, could lead to "total civil war."

"Some of the details of the US-TB agreement need serious debate and revision," Afghan presidential adviser Waheed Omer said on Twitter, without elaborating.

U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad showed

the draft of the U.S.-Taliban deal to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani earlier this week, saying it only needs President Donald Trump's approval. Khalilzad's ninth round of talks with the militant group in Qatar ended over the weekend.

Khalilzad also revealed that 5,000 U.S. troops would withdraw from five bases in Afghanistan within 135 days of a final deal on ending nearly 18 years of fighting. Between 13,000 and 14,000 troops are currently in the country.

The Taliban, at their strongest since their 2001 defeat by a U.S.-led invasion, want all of the approximately 20,000 U.S. and NATO troops out of Afghanistan immediately, while the U.S. seeks a withdrawal in phases that would depend on the Taliban meeting certain conditions such as a reduction in violence.

The U.S. also seeks Taliban guarantees that they will not allow Afghanistan to become a haven from which extremist groups such as al-Qaida and the local affiliate of Islamic State can launch global

attacks.

With few details of the deal made public and the Taliban continuing to carry out deadly attacks on civilians such as Monday night's suicide bombing in Kabul, doubts are growing that the militant group will respect any agreement, especially as U.S. troops leave. Trump's eagerness to pull out troops has hurt the U.S. negotiating position, some analysts have said.

The former U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan warned that "it is not clear whether peace is possible," saying the Taliban have "made it clear that the war will go on against the Afghan government." Moving too quickly to pull out troops could further embolden the Taliban to avoid making compromises in the intra-Afghan talks with the government and others meant to follow a deal with the U.S., they said.

The ensuing chaos could give al-Qaida and the local ISIS affiliate space to grow, the former envoys said. "All of this could prove catastrophic for U.S. national security," they said.

Official: 'Safe zone' in Syria off to good start

Associated Press

DARBASIYAH, Syria — The creation of a so-called "safe zone" in northeastern Syria has gotten off to good start, with U.S.-backed Kurdish-led forces pulling back from a small, initial area along the Turkish border, a Syrian Kurdish official said — but calm can prevail only if Turkey also removes its troops.

Ilham Ahmed, co-chair of the executive committee of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Council, said the understanding reached between Washington and Ankara last month, and in coordination with the Syrian Kurdish-led forces, constitutes a step toward starting a dialogue over mutual security concerns.

"We seek to find a way to dialogue, and starting to implement this plan expresses our readiness and seriousness," Ahmed said in an interview Tuesday with The Associated Press.

Ankara and Washington an-

nounced last month that they would begin measures to implement a border "safe zone" to address Turkish security concerns. The Kurdish-led forces are expected to pull out of the zone, but details must still be worked out — including who then would patrol and administer it.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan over the weekend repeated threats of an offensive if Turkey's demands on the zone are not satisfied, including that its soldiers control the area.

Ahmed said more U.S. troops will probably be needed to implement the zone, though the Americans have not said whether they will deploy any.

"In the coming days, and because of the needs of the formation and implementation of the security mechanism, they may need more forces. It is not yet clear what the U.S. administration would decide," she said.

Mattis levels indirect criticism at Trump

Bloomberg News

NEW YORK — Former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis criticized the polarized politics in Washington and America's failure to stand by its allies, all but indicting Donald Trump's policies even as he continued to refuse to single out the president by name.

"There will come a time when I speak out on strategic issues, on policy issues," said Mattis, who quit his Pentagon post in December, citing policy differences with the president, Tuesday. "But I need to give some period of time to those who have the responsibility to protect this country in a very difficult age."

Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, the retired Marine general acknowledged that "I've frustrated everyone so far" with oblique criticisms as he promotes "Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead," a new book he co-wrote on leadership.

While Mattis said that he doesn't want to carp from "the cheap seats," some of his recent comments left little doubt that he disapproved of Trump's approach.

"When we are done with an election, then we all need to at least, to roll up our sleeves and get to work governing," Mattis said Tuesday. "Elections are about dividing in order to get elected, I understand that. But governing is about uniting. And right now we seem to stay in a constant election mode, and I see it as 'let's just get together and figure out how to solve the problem together.'"

While Mattis refused to criticize the Trump administration's current push for an accord with the Taliban that would let American troops come home from Afghanistan, he did so indirectly by slamming former President Barack Obama's pullout from Iraq as a strategic blunder that let Islamic State terrorists flourish.

Clues to boat fire may be difficult to find

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Officials vowed to find what sparked the inferno aboard the dive boat *Conception* that killed 34 people in waters off Southern California but vital evidence may have gone down with the ship or drifted out to sea.

The main piece of evidence, the charred remains of the boat, rests on the sea floor in 60 feet of water. Other items that could provide clues could have been carried away by the tides or destroyed in the blaze that burned so hot DNA was needed to identify the dead.

“All of that will be a very large hurdle to overcome,” said George Zeitler, a former Coast Guard inspector, who runs his own marine investigation firm. “It will definitely make for a complex investigation.”

On Wednesday, authorities said 33 bodies had been recovered and one victim was still missing. The new count of confirmed deaths came after officials recovered 13 bodies on Tuesday, Coast Guard Lt. Zach Farrell said.

Investigators will want to produce a

timeline of the ship’s final voyage from the moment it pulled from a Santa Barbara dock early Saturday morning until dispatchers received the frantic mayday call of the breathless captain overwhelmed by smoke Monday, experts said. They will look at the ship’s layout and whether the bunk room below deck was too cramped and had enough exits, review maintenance records, even study photos and videos from people who have been on the boat to look for valuable evidence.

As the investigation into the Labor Day tragedy expands on land and sea, federal and local authorities will not only be looking at determining what went wrong but also seeking lessons that could lead to changes in regulations for commercial vessels.

The fire, which is being investigated with help from the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, is being treated as an accident and there’s nothing to suggest anything “nefarious,” said Santa Barbara County Sheriff Lt. Erik Raney.

The *Conception*, owned by Truth Aquatics, was being chartered for three days by a commercial dive outfit based in Santa Cruz to explore the rugged Channel Islands, sometimes referred to as the Galapagos of North America, about 20 miles south of Santa Barbara.

The mayday call came at 3:15 a.m. as passengers would have been sleeping while the boat was anchored just off Santa Cruz Island. While initial details were limited, Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown said fire above deck blocked the one stairway and an emergency exit hatch where 33 passengers and a crew member were sleeping in their bunks. It’s not known if an alarm sounded or what the people below deck may have done to try to escape.

The five survivors were all crew members, including the captain. They apparently jumped from the bow, where the stairway led to the sleeping quarters, and swam to the stern, where they escaped in a dinghy and were taken aboard a nearby boat.

McConnell wants Trump to chart path on gun laws

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congressional Republicans are waiting for the White House to chart a path forward on gun violence legislation, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday, effectively putting the burden on President Donald Trump to decide the GOP’s legislative response to the spate of mass shootings.

Asked about prospects for a Senate vote on legislation passed by the Democratic-controlled House to expand background checks for gun purchases, McConnell said, “The administration is in the process of studying what they’re prepared to support, if anything.”

The Kentucky Republican said he expects an answer from the White House next week, adding that he wants to make sure that senators “would actually be making a law and not just having serial votes” on pro-

posals to stem gun violence.

McConnell’s comments point to the challenge as Congress returns to a gun debate that emerged during their summer recess when mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, left 31 people dead.

While Trump has said he wants to work with Congress to “stop the menace of mass attacks,” he’s waffled on support for expanding background checks, making the next steps uncertain.

Trump and other Republicans have talked of pursuing other measures to address mental health or codify “red flag” laws that allow guns to be taken from people who pose harm to themselves or others, but even those measures face skepticism among GOP lawmakers.

The dynamic appears unchanged even after a shooting rampage in West Texas over the weekend that killed at least seven people.

Dems propose spending trillions on climate issues

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic presidential candidates are releasing their plans to address climate change ahead of a series of town halls on the issue as the party’s base increasingly demands aggressive action.

California Sen. Kamala Harris unveiled her plans Wednesday. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and former Obama Cabinet member Julian Castro laid out theirs on Tuesday. Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar released hers over the weekend.

The release of the competing plans comes as issues of climate and the environment have become a central focus of the Democratic primary. On Wednesday, 10 Democrats seeking the White House participated in back-to-back climate town halls hosted by CNN in New York. A second set of climate-focused town halls will be televised by MSNBC.

Liberals demanded that the Democratic Party focus at least one debate on climate change, but a climate debate resolution was defeated at the Democratic National Committee’s summer meeting last month.

The issue is so urgent among Democratic voters that Washington Gov. Jay Inslee made action to limit the worst extremes of climate change the core of his presidential bid. Inslee dropped out of the presidential race in August after failing to earn a spot in the September primary debate.

Warren says Inslee’s ideas “should remain at the center of the agenda,” and she met with him in Seattle when she visited for a rally before Labor Day, according to two people familiar with the meeting who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

She embraces deadlines for cutting or eliminating the use of fossil fuels by the U.S. electrical grid, highways and air transit systems and by cities.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man pulls gun over sold-out sandwiches

TX HOUSTON — The chicken sandwich wars escalated Monday when an enraged customer in the drive-thru pulled a gun on Pop-eyes employees when he was told the restaurant was sold out of chicken sandwiches.

According to police, a group of people were told they couldn't order the popular but hard-to-find new chicken sandwich.

The angry customers, including a man who pulled a gun, then tried to go inside the restaurant, but an employee was able to lock the door and keep them out, according to Houston television station KTRK.

Cat burglar turns out to actually be a cat

FL NAPLES — Florida deputies have a cat burglar in custody. Literally, a cat.

The Naples Daily News reported Collier County sheriff's deputies responded to a 911 call about a suspected burglary in progress.

A homeowner heard knocking on a sliding door along with meowing. The caller thought the cat sounds were a ruse to try to get them to open the door.

When deputies arrived, they found the culprit was a small cat named Bones.

Woman survives 80-foot fall from cliff

SD GARRETSON — Authorities said a woman survived a fall of more than 80 feet from a cliff into the water below at Palisades State Park.

Minnehaha County sheriff's officials said the 28-year-old Minnesota woman escaped

with minor injuries.

Sgt. Scott Dubbe told the Argus Leader witnesses saw the woman strike the side of the cliff several times before falling into the water.

Death of Zombie Fest blamed on town rules

DE MILTON — The streets of a small Delaware town are usually flooded each October by an undead horde, but it seems there won't be any dead men walking this year.

Milton Zombie Fest organizer and theater director Fred Munzert said the town approved new guidelines that essentially take the street festival off the street and increase the event's financial burden. The theater's board decided to cancel the event.

Munzert told The News Journal of Wilmington that the town council and mayor barred the event's stage and vendors from the street and halved its number of approved food trucks.

Mayor Ted Kanakos didn't respond to requests for comment.

Drive-in theater's stolen sign returned

MT BOZEMAN — A landmark sign from Bozeman's old Starlite drive-in theater was returned to its owner after it was stolen last month.

The Bozeman Daily Chronicle reported the second half of the two-piece "Starlite" sign was taken from outside Media Station Design Works, which specializes in making signs and artwork.

Owner Ole Nelson contacted police, who found the sign in the possession of two college students. Nelson said both wrote him to apologize.

City's foam container ban takes effect

MD ANNAPOLIS — A ban on plastic foam containers aimed at businesses that sell food has taken effect in Maryland's capital city.

The Capital Gazette reported the ban on the material, commonly referred to as Styrofoam, began Sunday in Annapolis. The Maryland General Assembly and Anne Arundel County Council have passed similar rules that will go into effect next year.

Lawmakers say the polystyrene in the containers is difficult to recycle.

Fugitive nabbed after leaping from buildings

CO COLORADO SPRINGS — Colorado Springs police said a man who was trying to elude officers jumped from a second-story window, ran to the roof of another building and leaped again before he was arrested.

KOAA-TV reported the man suffered non-life-threatening injuries in the incident and was taken to a hospital.

Police said the man's first jump was 25 feet and the second was 50 feet. He landed on the roof of an RV in his second jump. Authorities identified him as Bryan Anthony, 32.

Baseball team will be 'River Pigs' after all

NY TUPPER LAKE — Turns out residents of a New York village are hog wild for calling their future semi-pro baseball team the "River Pigs," after all.

The team had been rooting around for a new nickname after some objections from people in the Adirondacks com-

munity of Tupper Lake.

But the Adirondack Daily Enterprise reported that "River Pigs" got about 70 percent of the vote in public balloting. The team is to arrive next summer.

The name reflects the region's logging history. River pigs were skilled loggers who broke up logjams on rivers.

Parade canceled after devices found in home

NJ SOUTH PLAINFIELD — Authorities said "destructive devices" found in a nearby home prompted cancellation of a New Jersey Labor Day parade that was to have been attended by the state's governor and first lady.

Middlesex County prosecutors and police said Thomas Kaiser, 55, of South Plainfield was charged with possession of a destructive device for an unlawful purpose.

Authorities said a suspicious package with a destructive device left at a bar in Sea Bright led to Kaiser's home, and other devices were found there.

Geese carcasses found along road

MN MOORHEAD — The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources said it is investigating who discarded more than a dozen geese carcasses in a ditch along a busy road near the North Dakota state line.

WDAY-TV reported the geese had their breast meat harvested before their carcasses were tossed in Oakport Township.

Canada goose hunting season is open in some parts of North Dakota but the season didn't start in Minnesota until Sunday. The carcasses were found in August.

From wire reports

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NFL at 100: Reviews steal spotlight

Associated Press

The NFL would love the main focus of 2019 to be on the celebrations of its 100th season.

Sorry.

While the history of the league is a widespread and fun topic, what happened last January in the NFC championship game has guaranteed the spotlight will be shining on officiating and replays.

After an egregious missed penalty (or two) that basically kept the Saints from making the Super Bowl and helped the Rams get there instead, there was little chance attention could be diverted from the guys with the whistles and their impact on games. Commissioner Roger Goodell, the league's powerful competition committee and a vast majority of the owners recognized this — and did something about it.

Coaches can now challenge pass interference calls and non-calls as part of the replay review system. Just as with other in-game instances, the replay booth will initiate any

reviews in the final two minutes of both halves and for an entire overtime.

As former NFL defensive back Adam Archuleta, now a CBS game analyst, notes: “They have opened a huge can of worms.”

Sure, the Browns' upgrades — some people envision Cleveland (yes, Cleveland) as a Super Bowl contender — provide a ripe subject. So do the head coaching changes, including Bruce Arians returning to the sideline one year after retiring.

There are the aged quarterbacks, from 42-year-old Tom Brady to 40-year-old Drew Brees to late-thirtysomethings Ben Roethlisberger, Eli Manning and Philip Rivers. And the fledging QBs such as Baker Mayfield, Sam Darnold, Lamar Jackson and Kyler Murray.

Don't forget those big stars in new places: Le'Veon Bell, Odell Beckham Jr., Earl Thomas and Antonio Brown.

And let's ignore Brown's helmet complaints and frost-bitten digits.

But we all know what will hog the limelight.

Interfering with replay

Gene Steratore spent 13 years as an NFL referee and also was a college basketball official. Now with CBS as an officiating analyst, he knew some sort of change in the review system would emerge from the Rams-Saints debacle.

“Understand first that they were making the call in real time,” Steratore says. “That will remain the standard and base on which calls will be made on all plays. Then we get to replays, which are in slow motion of course, and you are getting a different look (than an official might get in real time).”

“Then there is the determination of what is significant contact. Did it impede someone from making a play? Was it incidental? Some of that is adding subjectivity to the process.”

Archuleta, not surprisingly for a former safety, adamantly disagrees with adding any-

thing to the replay system, particularly pass interference penalties.

“It's not good for the game, which is not meant to be played in slow motion or officiated that way,” he says. “I don't want them stopping games in critical moments. Pro football is an exciting and emotional sport and stoppages take away from that.”

A realist, Archuleta admits he knew something would happen after the New Orleans debacle. He accepts the coaches' challenge as the most logical means, but doesn't have to like it.

The addition of pass interference will change the strategies for using challenges. An early false spotting of the ball, for example, might not see a red flag thrown because a coach realizes a late DPI or OPI call or non-call would be far more impacting. Indeed, there might be fewer overall disruptions by challenges as coaches save them for second-half needs that maybe never arrive.

Packers seem to be over audible questions, set for Bears

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — How much freedom will Aaron Rodgers have in coach Matt LaFleur's offense? Will he be able to change plays at the line of scrimmage?

LaFleur said Monday that Rodgers will have a “green light” to change plays in order to put the offense in the best position to succeed.

As the Rodgers audible-related questions continued Tuesday, LaFleur, visibly annoyed, looked to put an end to all the chatter.

“You guys just will not stop with this audible thing,” the first-year coach said. “It's unbelievable. What do you guys want me to say?”

“We've always had adjustments within our plays, it's just we called it something differ-

ent,” LaFleur said. “And the fact that I didn't call it an audible, everyone's running wild with it. It's comical to me. But like I've said, I feel good with what we've got in our plan, how we've gotten to this point and I'm confident that he's got a total command and control of what we're trying to get done.”

The questions will likely be answered on the field Thursday night when LaFleur, Rodgers and the Packers open in Chicago.

Rodgers will face the same defense that forced him out of the game and into the locker room in the second quarter of the season opener last season.

After having his left knee evaluated, the two-time MVP returned in the second half and threw three touchdown passes to help the Packers overcome a 20-point deficit in a thrilling

24-23 win at Lambeau Field.

“That was an exciting game, one that ranks up there for me in all-time games and best experiences on the field,” Rodgers said on Sunday.

But that was last year.

This is a new year and a new offense.

“I think everybody needs to understand this is going to be the first iteration of our offense and because it's a new scheme and there are new pieces, this is going to grow from this point,” Rodgers said. “I'm excited about the stuff we have in and the stuff we've been working on in camp. There's going to be even more. I think that's the exciting part.”

The crucial part for the Packers will be keeping Rodgers upright. Linebacker Khalil Mack and the Bears' defense had four sacks in last season's

opener and another five when the teams squared off again in Week 15.

“And the thing is, it's not just Mack,” LaFleur said. “They've got a couple guys that are like that. That's what makes it so challenging. You focus on one guy and the next thing you know, you've got (linebacker Leonard) Floyd or (defensive tackle Akiem) Hicks in your backfield as well. They've got a lot of good pieces across their defense that you have to account for on each and every play.”

Chicago defeated Green Bay 24-17 in the December 2018 matchup and clinched the NFC North.

The Bears held Rodgers without a touchdown pass and put an end to his NFL-record streak without an interception in the rematch.

Cowboys, Elliott agree on extension

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Ezekiel Elliott has a new contract with the Dallas Cowboys just in time for the regular season.

The star running back and the club agreed Wednesday on a \$90 million, six-year contract extension that will make him the NFL's highest-paid player at his position and end a holdout that lasted the entire preseason.

The breakthrough was finalized before dawn on the morning of the team's first full workout before Sunday's opener at home against the New York Giants.

Elliott will get \$50 million guaranteed. The \$15 million-per-year average on the extension surpasses the \$14.4 million Todd Gurley got from the Los Angeles Rams last summer. Gurley's guarantee was \$45 million.

The 41-day stalemate between Dallas and the two-time NFL rushing champion came with the Cowboys holding high expectations coming off their first playoff win with Elliott and quarterback Dak Prescott. They have won two NFC East titles in three seasons together.

Prescott and receiver Amari Cooper are also seeking long-term contracts in the final year of their rookie deals. But getting an agreement with Elliott settles the most important issue as the Cowboys try to get past the divisional round for the first time since winning the last of the franchise's five Super Bowls during the 1995 season.

Elliott held out with two years left on his rookie contract, at \$3.9 million this season and \$9.1 million in 2020. The fourth overall pick in the 2016 draft wanted to be the highest-paid back after getting those two rushing titles in only

three years.

Now the 24-year-old is, with a contract that totals \$103 million over the next eight seasons.

"I'm \$100 million lighter as of this morning," owner Jerry Jones said on CNBC in New York, where he and his son, executive vice president Stephen Jones, rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange. "Zeke has been arguably our best player. We're glad to get him booked in."

Even when he was suspended for six games over domestic violence allegations in 2017, Elliott still had the best per-game rushing average in the league.

But the off-field issues were part of the backdrop as the impasse dragged on, although Jerry Jones, also the team's general manager, said more than once he didn't consider Elliott's issues a factor as it related to a new contract.

Jones jokingly said "Zeke

who?" in response to a question from a reporter after a second straight solid preseason showing from rookie fourth-round pick Tony Pollard in Hawaii.

A few days later, though, Jones sternly said he had earned the right to joke about Elliott after the 2016 All-Pro's representatives took offense to the remark. The owner strongly supported Elliott during a court fight over the suspension.

As the regular season drew closer, Jones took an increasingly hardline stance publicly, finally calling out Elliott during his radio show last week for not honoring his existing contract.

But Elliott's agent, Rocky Arceneaux, told reporters the sides were close to a deal after Elliott landed at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport on Tuesday. Elliott spent almost the entire holdout in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

Injuries already taking a toll on Pac-12 programs

Associated Press

It's just a week into the season and injuries are already taking a toll in the Pac-12.

USC quarterback J.T. Daniels and Stanford counterpart K.J. Costello were among the players who got knocked out of their season openers. So did Washington senior center Nick Harris.

Graduate transfer Juwan Johnson, expected to start at receiver for Oregon, didn't even suit up for Saturday's big game against Auburn. And UCLA was missing several top playmakers.

Daniels' injury will arguably have the biggest impact on his team. The 6-foot-3 sophomore tore a ligament and the meniscus in his right knee late in the first half of the Trojans' 31-23 victory over Fresno State and will miss the rest of the season.

Daniels was adjusting this season to an Air Raid-style offense under new offensive coordinator Graham Harrell and

had fared well in the opener before he was hurt, throwing for 215 yards and a touchdown.

Now USC (1-0) must turn to freshman quarterback Kedon Slovis.

Slovis' debut as starter might come against another QB getting his first start, Stanford's Davis Mills. The Trojans host the Cardinal (1-0) on Saturday in an early conference matchup at the Coliseum.

Stanford coach David Shaw said Costello is questionable for the game.

Costello got a forearm to the facemask from Northwestern's Earnest Brown late in the first half Saturday. Costello, who threw for 152 yards and a touchdown before he was hurt, did not return. Brown was called for a late hit, but not targeting.

Shaw said Tuesday he believed the officials missed the call.

Mills, a junior, replaced Costello and threw for 81 yards, but he also fumbled twice and

the Cardinal did not score in the second half. With the 17-7 victory, Stanford moved up two spots to No. 23 in the Top 25.

Shaw, who had recruited Daniels, called the season-ending injury a shame. But he said it would not have too much impact on Stanford's preparation.

"Our defensive mentality is to accentuate what we do well and we talk a lot about our scheme versus their scheme, more so than who is playing quarterback," Shaw said. "The young man went in there last week and made some great throws and some nice plays, but for the most part for us we've got to go in there and play to our strengths and play our style of football."

Oregon's receiver woes: It was something of a surprise when Johnson was sidelined for the Ducks' season-opening 27-21 loss to Auburn.

Coach Mario Cristobal said Monday that the unspecified injury occurred late last week

in practice and Johnson is currently listed as day-to-day. The Ducks were already hurting at receiver with Brenden Schooler (right foot) and Mycah Pittman (right shoulder) out. Promising freshman receiver JR Waters will miss the season with a foot injury.

To help alleviate the situation, the Ducks have moved redshirt freshman tight end Spencer Webb to receiver. Webb had three catches for 28 yards and a touchdown in the opener.

"He played a lot of wide receiver or I would say a lot of detached tight end formational stuff in high school," Cristobal said. "So he's very natural in space. And when the opportunity arose with all of the injuries that transpired we felt, 'You know what, let's give this thing a look.'"

The Ducks also moved sophomore cornerback Daewood Davis to receiver. That's where Davis played his first year with the Ducks.

US Open

Serena moves into semis; Federer out

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The numbers associated with Serena Williams' U.S. Open quarter-final victory over Wang Qiang were so stark they bear reading more than once.

Winners: 25-0. Points: 50-15. Minutes: 44. Score: 6-1, 6-0.

This is the portion of the tournament that is supposed to be where winning a Grand Slam title gets difficult, where the remaining players are among the very best opposition around. And yet there was Williams in Arthur Ashe Stadium on Tuesday night, making one of the last eight women in the draw, someone ranked No. 18

in a world of billions, look and feel completely overwhelmed.

"Didn't give her too many chances," Williams said.

A reporter wanted to know what surprised Wang the most about being across the net from Williams for the first time.

"Power," came the answer.

The way she hit groundstrokes from the baseline? The way she served?

"Everything," Wang said with a smile.

Looking as dominant as can be as she moved closer to a 24th Grand Slam singles trophy and seventh U.S. Open championship, Williams was not troubled one bit by the right ankle she rolled in her previous match.

"Physically, I'm feeling great," Williams said, "and more than anything, I'm having fun every time I come out here."

Roger Federer followed her into Ashe and did not have a good time, dealing with upper back and neck problems while giving away leads against a guy he'd never lost to, bowing out in the quarterfinals 3-6, 6-4, 3-6, 6-4, 6-2 against 78th-ranked Grigor Dimitrov.

"Just disappointed it's over. Because I actually was feeling I was playing really well," said Federer, who said he began having physical problems Tuesday afternoon and then took a rare-for-him medical timeout before

the fifth set. "A missed opportunity, to some extent."

The No. 3-seeded Federer joined defending champion and No. 1 seed Novak Djokovic on the sideline less than two months after their epic five-set Wimbledon final. Djokovic retired from his fourth-round match at the U.S. Open because of a painful left shoulder.

Dimitrov will play No. 5 Daniil Medvedev in the semifinals Friday.

Medvedev reached his first Grand Slam semifinal by overcoming 12 double-faults and a left thigh issue to get past three-time major champion Stan Wawrinka 7-6 (6), 6-3, 3-6, 6-1.

MLB roundup

Nationals rally past Mets with 7 runs in ninth inning

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Kurt Suzuki capped the largest ninth-inning comeback in Nationals franchise history with a game-ending, three-run homer, helping Washington score seven runs in its final at-bat to beat the New York Mets 11-10 Tuesday night.

Mets relievers Paul Sewald, Luis Avilan and Edwin Diaz pitched through the meltdown, retiring just one Nationals batter while Washington rallied for its 20th win in 26 games.

New York led 10-4 after scoring five runs in the top of the ninth. Wilson Ramos extended his hitting streak to 26 games and Pete Alonso crushed his 44th homer to put the Mets in position for a win over the current leaders in the NL wild-card hunt.

Phillies 6, Reds 2: Bryce Harper drove in his 100th run with a single, J.T. Realmuto had a pair of hits and a sacrifice fly, and visiting Philadelphia won its third in a row over

Cincinnati.

Yankees 10, Rangers 1: James Paxton (12-6) pitched one-hit ball for seven shutout innings, striking out 12 and winning his seventh straight start as host New York beat Texas.

Braves 7, Blue Jays 2: Josh Donaldson doubled and drove in three runs, Mike Foltynewicz (5-5) pitched five scoreless innings, and host Atlanta won its sixth straight game.

Cardinals 1, Giants 0: Jack Flaherty pitched one-hit ball over eight innings, Marcell Ozuna homered and host St. Louis — with a fluky foul ball-turned-base hit — beat San Francisco.

Orioles 4-0, Rays 2-2: Austin Meadows homered, seven relievers combined on a five-hitter and playoff-contending Tampa Bay blanked visiting Baltimore to split a doubleheader.

The Rays, who began the day with a slight lead atop the AL wild-card race, had their five-game winning streak stopped

with a loss in the opener.

Twins 6, Red Sox 5: Nelson Cruz and Miguel Sano connected in the fifth inning to pad Minnesota's record home run total in a victory over host Boston.

Cubs 6, Mariners 1: Nicholas Castellanos homered and drove in four runs, and host Chicago celebrated the return of Willson Contreras and Ben Zobrist by topping Seattle.

Diamondbacks 2, Padres 1: Merrill Kelly (10-13) pitched three-hit ball over seven scoreless innings, closer Archie Bradley stranded the bases loaded in the ninth and host Arizona beat San Diego.

Brewers 4, Astros 2: Zack Greinke lost his first game since joining Houston, giving up a three-run homer to Eric Thames as host Milwaukee earned a split of the interleague series.

White Sox 6, Indians 5: Carlos Carrasco received a standing ovation in his first appearance at Progressive Field since being diagnosed with leu-

kemia, but gave up home runs to James McCann and Eloy Jimenez in the eighth inning that lifted visiting Chicago over Cleveland.

Dodgers 5, Rockies 3: Russell Martin hit a go-ahead, three-run homer with two outs and pinch-hitter David Freese followed with a solo shot in the seventh inning, lifting host Los Angeles over Colorado.

Marlins 5, Pirates 4 (10): Miguel Rojas hit a tying home run with two outs in the ninth and Garrett Cooper connected in the 10th as Miami rallied past Pittsburgh, ending its franchise-record 15-game road losing streak.

Royals 6, Tigers 5: Jorge Soler broke the Kansas City home run record with his 39th of the season and Ryan O'Hearn hit a game-ending home run to beat visiting Detroit.

Athletics 7, Angels 5: Seth Brown hit his second RBI triple of the game to break a sixth-inning tie, Matt Chapman hit a three-run homer, and host Oakland beat Los Angeles.