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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Combat drones to be used in sea operations

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

Hunter-killer drones that have been a go-to weapon for troops battling insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa are being repurposed for maritime operations, according to U.S. military officials.

Three MQ-9 Reaper drones are supporting the Navy and Marine Corps during Agile Reaper, an exercise off the California coast that began Sept. 3 and wraps up Tuesday, said Lt. Col. Brian Davis, commander of the 29th Attack Squadron at Holloman Air Force Base, N.M.

"Our primary focus has been on counterinsurgency," Davis said during a Monday telephone interview. "That's no longer the limit of what we can do."

The drones, which carry long-range radar and can provide commanders with full-motion video of the sea below, have

been doing close air support, search and rescue, maritime interdiction, strike coordination and reconnaissance and surveillance during the exercise, he said.

The drones, made by General Atomics, of San Diego, can carry 3,000 pounds of ordnance and first saw combat in Afghanistan in 2007 and Iraq the following year. They've conducted numerous missions there and in other parts of the Middle East and Africa.

Reapers have made some high-profile kills.

A missile fired by one of the drones killed the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, when it struck his convoy near Baghdad International Airport, the New York Times reported Jan. 2.

Even as they continue counterinsurgency operations, the Reapers' mission is changing in line with the military's preparation for conflict with a near-peer adversary such as China or Russia.

Agile Reaper is designed to test the aircraft's ability to rapidly mobilize with minimal logistics and fuel, according to Davis.

"We've only scratched the surface of the MQ-9's capability," he said. "We are transitioning to an ability to generate combat airpower anywhere to include the maritime domain and we are tactically quite good at it."

The Reapers can operate beyond a potential enemy's targeting capabilities, Davis said.

"I can provide maritime domain awareness out to incredibly long ranges especially compared to other aircraft and without the need for tanker support," he said. "We can do this in any environment including the most highly contested environments."

The Reapers flew 2,000

miles to California and still had plenty of fuel left to operate, Davis said.

The number of personnel required to operate the drones is confidential, he said but added that it's a fraction of the number required to fly manned aircraft. And the drones require less support than they did a few years back, he said.

"No longer is the MQ-9 tied down to large forward operating bases or bases in the continental United States," he said.

Airmen can rapidly deploy, launch and recover the Reapers and move to another location, Davis said.

At sea the drones are armed with the same missiles they use on land, he said. He didn't specify the drones' armament, but reports have noted their employment of Hellfire missiles.

"We are just as capable (at sea) without changing our weapons in any way," Davis said.

Parris Island proposal stuns local officials

The (S.C.) Island Packet

HILTON HEAD ISLAND, S.C. — Even officials close to Parris Island seemed just as blindsided as the rest of the community when news broke Friday that the U.S. Marine Corps is considering closing its Port Royal recruiting depot as it moves toward gender-integrated facilities across the country.

They joined the thousands of Parris Island graduates and families affected by the news, which came down from Marine Corps commandant Gen. David H. Berger on Thursday.

A report says the military branch is considering closing

its only two boot camps, Parris Island and San Diego, to create a third, new co-educational depot.

Port Royal Mayor Joe DeVito said he found out about the announcement through reading the newspaper Friday morning.

"I'm obviously a little bit surprised that the announcement came out in that way," he said, adding that news like this can "get a lot of people concerned."

"This is a big part of Port Royal's history," he said, explaining that the depot is located within town limits. "We're engaged all the time with the base and we're ready to work with them in any way we can to

keep them here."

"All the local officials in Beaufort and Port Royal are actively engaged in what's happening here now and are going to stay on top of it," DeVito said. "We're ready to join in on this conversation to help them make the decision to keep the base here."

When reached Friday morning, Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling was unaware of the news. He asked to take a moment to read about the details and call the reporter back.

"I'm interested," Keyserling said after a long pause. "I don't see it as a decision. I see it as a consideration." He called it a "heads up" of sorts.

"But until after the election I tend to be skeptical of any rumors, innuendos, suggestions that come out of Washington (D.C.) by either party and believe that we should be diligent," he said.

He said nothing will happen overnight, but if the time comes the community will rally around Parris Island.

"(The recruiting depot) is extraordinarily important to us. It's part of our history," he said. "It's been more than 100 years of a fabulous relationship between the Beaufort community and the Marine Corps and we would not want to see that change."

Afghan war sees longest span with no US combat deaths

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Sunday is set to mark the longest span between U.S. combat deaths of the nearly 19-year war in Afghanistan, even while fighting continues between the Taliban and U.S.-allied Afghan government forces.

Enemy fire last killed U.S. troops in the country on Feb. 8 — 232 days prior to Sunday. Previously, the longest period between combat deaths was in 2016, according to Defense Manpower Data Center figures.

The break in U.S. combat deaths follows the signing of a U.S.-Taliban deal in late February, in which both sides said they would refrain from attacking each other.

"The Taliban have adhered to the commitment largely not to attack U.S. personnel and U.S. forces," Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S.'s top negotiator with the Taliban, told a House hearing Tuesday.

The absence of combat deaths indicates the U.S.-Taliban deal is benefiting U.S. interests, and will likely be seen by the Trump administration as an achievement, said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia program at the Wilson Center in Washington.

"Still, at the end of the day, it would be a disservice for U.S. officials to focus on this milestone," Kugelman said. "There's a bigger picture at play, and it's grim: The war remains intense and deadly for Afghans, and a long and fraught peace process won't likely bring relief for quite some time."

Despite curtailing violence against foreign troops, the Tal-

iban initiated at least 7,000 attacks on Afghan targets over the past six months, according to Afghan government figures.

The violence has grown since Sept. 12, when Taliban and Afghan government representatives began long-delayed peace talks in Qatar. Both sides have accused each other of ramping up attacks in a bid to gain leverage.

"Virtually all the fighting with the Taliban today is being conducted by Afghan security forces, not America — and that is appropriate," said Daniel Davis, a senior fellow at Defense Priorities, a Washington-based think tank that promotes military restraint.

It remains in the U.S.'s interest to fully withdraw from Afghanistan, Davis said, and an extended period free of American combat fatalities doesn't change that.

"This period is nothing to celebrate, because the objective of the war isn't to keep our deployed troops from being killed," Davis said.

The U.S. remains on course to reduce its troop strength in Afghanistan to between 4,000 and 5,000 by the end of November, with the Defense Department saying that will be sufficient to carry out its counterterrorism and training missions.

Under the U.S.-Taliban deal, all remaining troops could be withdrawn by mid-2021 if the Taliban severs ties with groups like al-Qaida and meets other conditions.

However, some analysts and lawmakers have decried a lack of clear mechanisms to measure Taliban compliance.

Ukrainian military plane crashes, burst into flames

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Searchers combing the area where a Ukrainian military aircraft crashed found two more bodies Saturday, bringing the death toll to 26. One person survived.

The plane, a twin-turboprop Antonov-26 belonging to the Ukrainian air force, was carrying a crew of seven and 20 cadets of a military aviation school when it crashed and burst into flames Friday night while coming in for landing at the airport in Chuhuiv, about 250 miles east of the capital Kyiv.

Two people initially survived the crash, but one later died in a hospital. No cause for the crash has been determined.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy declared Saturday to be a day of mourning for the crash victims and ordered An-26 flights be halted pending investigation into the cause of the crash.

Zelenskiy, who visited the crash area Saturday, called for a full assessment of the condition of the country's military equipment. Prime Minister Denis Shygal called for an official report on the crash by Oct. 25.

"Yesterday we lost young cadets and experienced military men, who had their whole lives and, I am sure, more than one military feat ahead of them," Zelenskiy said in a statement released by his office. "The whole country will mourn today with their families."

Deputy Defense Minister Igor Starobinsky said the families of the dead would each be paid compensation of about \$56,000.

The An-26 is a transport plane used by both military and civilian operators. Nearly 1,400 of the planes were manufactured from 1969 to 1986, according to the company's website. Defense Minister Andrei Taran said the plane that crashed was built in 1977.

2 charged over handling of outbreak at vet homes

Associated Press

BOSTON — Two former administrators of a Massachusetts veterans home where nearly 80 people sickened by the coronavirus died have been charged over their handling of the outbreak, the state attorney general said Friday.

It's believed to be the first criminal case in the country brought against nursing home officials for actions during the pandemic, Attorney General Maura Healey said.

Former Holyoke Soldiers' Home Superintendent Bennett Walsh and former Medical Director Dr. David Clinton were indicted by a grand jury on charges stemming from their decision in March to combine two dementia units, packing residents who were positive for

the coronavirus into the same space as those with no symptoms, Healey said.

They could each face prison time if convicted of causing or permitting serious bodily injury or neglect of an elder, Healey said.

The charges come three months after a scathing independent report said "utterly baffling" decisions made by Walsh and other administrators allowed the virus to spread unchecked. The "worst decision" was to combine the two locked dementia units, both of which already housed some residents with the virus, said.

Walsh has defended his response, saying state officials initially refused in March to send National Guard aid even as the home was dealing with dire staffing shortages.

Sunday hearing scheduled on US TikTok ban

Bloomberg

A federal judge scheduled a rare Sunday morning hearing to decide whether the U.S. can go through with its ban on the popular video-sharing app TikTok.

ByteDance Ltd., TikTok's Chinese owner, has asked the court to block the ban, set to begin on Sunday night, even as it pursues approvals from the government for the sale of a stake in its U.S. operations to Oracle Corp. and Walmart Inc. under pressure from President Donald Trump. It argued in court filings Friday that the ban would trample constitutional free-speech protections.

Trump cited national security risks in August, when he announced a ban on the widely-used network from U.S. app stores. The president, who's also barred WeChat, owned by China's Tencent Holdings Ltd., has told ByteDance its only alternative is to sell its American TikTok business. The

U.S. Justice Department argues the apps potentially give China's government access to millions of Americans' personal data.

The government emphasized those concerns in a filing on Friday, urging U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols not to grant the temporary block. U.S. lawyers cited FBI Director Christopher Wray's assessment that China poses the "greatest long-term threat to our nation's information and intellectual property" as a reason for the ban.

"One of the tools that the PRC uses to further its goals is bulk data collection," the U.S. government said, referring to the People's Republic of China.

ByteDance, founded in 2012 by Zhang Yiming, has close ties to the Chinese Communist Party and must abide by laws that require it to cooperate with China's government, the U.S. said.

"In April 2018, the CCP forced ByteDance to shut down one of its other plat-

forms, and Mr. Yiming issued a public apology in which he pledged to cooperate with and elevate official CCP media," the U.S. said. "Following this public atonement, ByteDance underwent organizational restructuring with CCP infrastructure now built into it."

The ban, announced in an Aug. 6 executive order, is part of a wider effort by the administration to take a hard line against Beijing, which Trump bets will help him win re-election.

Starting at 11:59 p.m. on Sept. 27, it would remove TikTok from the app stores run by Apple and Google's Android, the most widely used marketplaces for downloadable apps. People who don't yet have the app wouldn't be able to get it, and those who already have it wouldn't have access to updates needed to ensure its safe and smooth operation. TikTok is used regularly by 19 million Americans.

As Trump readies debate attack, Biden allies worry

The Washington Post

President Donald Trump is gearing up to launch blistering personal attacks on Joe Biden and his family in the first presidential debate on Tuesday, while Biden is bracing for an onslaught and worried allies are warning the Democratic nominee not to lose his temper and lash out, according to people with knowledge of the strategies in both camps.

Trump has told associates he wants to talk specifically about his opponent's son Hunter Biden and mused that the debates are when "people will finally realize Biden is just not there," according to one adviser. The president is so eager to lay into his rival that he has called aides to test out various attacks, focusing on attacks that cast Biden

as a longtime Washington insider with a limited record of accomplishment, said another adviser, who like many interviewed for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly describe private talks.

Biden and his advisers are anticipating a venomous barrage, according to a person with knowledge of their thinking, and they are preparing to counter with an affirmative case for a Biden presidency. The Democrat wants to stay focused on how he would address the coronavirus pandemic and the country's economic problems, which he blames Trump for worsening.

The prospect of a cage match between a president for whom no subject is off-limits and a challenger who can be openly emotional is making some Biden advisers ner-

vous. They see a fine line between Biden's passion and empathy, which can appeal to voters, and the raw anger that sometimes gets him in trouble and could undercut his pitch as a calming alternative to a president who thrives on chaos.

"When you go at his family, he becomes hotter than hell, which is part of the thing I worry about," said John Morgan, a Florida trial lawyer and major Biden donor. "I think what Biden has to be careful about is not letting his Irish temper blow when that happens."

Biden's emotion, especially when it comes to his family, has often been a strong suit. But he has also shown a tendency to lose his composure when his record, and especially his decency, are questioned.

California braces for shutoffs and hot, windy weekend

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Firefighters in northern and central California were bracing Saturday for hot, dry and windy weather that may fan the flames of several major wildfires or ignite new ones.

Efforts to corral more than two dozen wildfires across the state have benefited recently from low winds and with moist air flowing inland from the Pacific. But forecasters said that weather pattern will reverse during the weekend as a ridge of high pressure boosts temperatures and

generates gusts flowing from the interior to the coast.

In northern and central areas of the state, the strongest winds are forecast to occur from Saturday night into Sunday morning, followed by another burst Sunday night into Monday.

The Pacific Gas & Electric utility was tracking the forecasts to determine if it would be necessary to shut off power to areas where gusts could damage the company's equipment or hurl debris into lines that can ignite flammable vegetation.

The shutoffs could potentially affect 97,000 customers in 16 counties starting Saturday evening through Monday.

PG&E equipment has sparked large wildfires, including the deadly 2018 fire that destroyed much of the Sierra foothills town of Paradise and killed 85 people.

Numerous studies in recent years have linked bigger U.S. wildfires to global warming from the burning of coal, oil and gas, especially because climate change has made California much drier. A drier California means plants are more flammable.

Ore. reports largest daily virus case count

Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — The Oregon Health Authority reported 457 new confirmed COVID-19 cases on Friday, the state's largest daily total since the start of the pandemic.

Officials attributed the rise in cases to Labor Day gatherings, the return of college students to campus and the interruption of testing during recent wildfires in Oregon.

"Today we find ourselves at another crossroads," Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen said. "After weeks of steady decline in COVID-19, cases have begun rising."

Currently more than 32,300 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in Oregon. The death toll is 542.

For six weeks, Oregon's COVID-19 cases and rate of transmission were heading down.

However, Allen said that the most recent data provided by the Oregon Health Authority shows that the percentage of positive tests has increased from 5.6% to 6.2% and hospitalizations increased by 28%, revealing "how fragile our progress against the virus is."

Utah

SALT LAKE CITY — An outbreak at a Utah homeless shelter has resulted in 72 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, officials reported.

The rapid increase in cases at the Gail Miller Resource Center in Salt Lake City coincides with a rise in cases in the state as a whole. Utah reported 1,404 new confirmed cases of the coronavirus on Thursday, up from 306 new confirmed cases on Sept. 8.

There are currently 93 confirmed cases in Salt Lake City-area homeless shelters, officials said.

Homeless people are thought to be more vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus than the general population because those who live in encampments typically have limited access to hygienic services and find themselves in cramped

rooms packed with dozens of others, the Salt Lake Tribune reported.

Arizona

PHOENIX — New coronavirus cases in Arizona are remaining fairly stable as the state continues to see no big rise in cases after the Labor Day holiday.

The state Health Services Department reported 518 new virus cases Friday, bringing the total since the pandemic began hitting the state in March to 216,367. The state also reported 28 new deaths, which the total to 5,587.

The 7-day rolling average of daily new cases in Arizona has risen over the past two weeks from 436 new cases per day on Sept. 10 to 599 new cases per day on Sept. 24, according to data from The COVID Tracking Project. But the past week has seen no continuation of that increase.

Texas

AUSTIN — Texas health officials reported 3,306 new cases Friday of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, along with 97 new deaths from the illness.

The newly reported cases raised the total number of cases since tracking of the virus started in March to 728,552, with an estimated 67,045 cases now active and 3,221 of those requiring hospitalization, the Texas Department of State Health Services reported.

Meanwhile, the Texas death toll for the outbreak rose to 15,364.

Iowa

DES MOINES — Iowa reported a jump of 1,086 new coronavirus cases on Friday, the second consecutive day of new cases exceeding 1,000.

Four more people died, pushing the state's death toll from the virus to 1,303.

Gov. Kim Reynolds signed on Friday a new emergency proclamation that continues bar closures in Johnson and Story counties, where the University

of Iowa and Iowa State University are located at least for another week.

Data from state health and education departments indicate the virus is circulating in schools and nursing homes.

Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Gov. Andy Beshear reported 930 new cases of coronavirus in Kentucky on Friday and 12 additional deaths.

"We cannot continue to have days where we have 900-plus cases," Beshear said. "Please put on your mask. Please engage in social distancing. The lives and the health of the Kentuckians around us depend on it."

The new cases brought the state's total to 65,066. The deaths increased the total to 1,149.

The positivity rate fell again to 4.48% with more than 1.3 million coronavirus tests performed in Kentucky. The positivity rate is a rolling figure that reflects the average number of tests coming back positive for COVID-19.

South Carolina

COLUMBIA — For the second time this week, South Carolina health officials said a lab failed to report thousands of COVID-19 tests over several months.

Urgent care clinic chain Doctors Care reported the results of more than 7,000 COVID-19 tests from July through this week. About 400 of them were positive, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control said in a news release Friday.

The delay in testing both prevents the agency from tracing any contacts that a person testing positive had and prevents DHEC from getting an accurate picture of the spread of a virus on a particular day, the agency said.

On Tuesday, state officials announced that the Augusta University Healthcare system in Georgia failed to report the results of 15,000 coronavirus

tests — 2,000 of them positive — that were conducted on South Carolina residents from May to September.

Rhode Island

PROVIDENCE — Providence College said Friday that a remote-only learning plan put in place because of a coronavirus outbreak that has affected more than 200 students has been extended an additional week, until Oct. 3.

Although the number of cases among students has been on the rise, the private Roman Catholic school has been aggressively testing students and staff and said its positivity rate has been on the decline since the outbreak was reported Sept. 16.

Most of the students who have tested positive live off campus.

"We apologize sincerely for our part in exacerbating COVID-19 positivity rates in the state, and for putting the health of residents at risk," the college said in a statement.

Off-campus students have been told not to leave their apartments, while on-campus students are not allowed off campus. The school has about 4,800 students.

Wisconsin

MADISON — Wisconsin's newly reported COVID-19 cases grew again Friday, just shy of the highest daily total since the pandemic broke out.

The state Department of Health Services reported 2,504 new cases, short of the record set exactly one week ago of 2,533 new cases. On Thursday, there were 2,392 new cases.

In total, Wisconsin has had nearly 111,000 people test positive and 1,274 deaths.

Over the past two weeks, the rolling average number of daily new cases in Wisconsin has increased by 936, an increase of 93%. There were 403 new cases per 100,000 people in Wisconsin over the past two weeks, which ranks fourth in the country for new cases per capita.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

2 injured after butane causes house blast

MI COMMERCE TOWNSHIP — A house exploded in suburban Detroit, a blast so loud and powerful that it injured two men and triggered car alarms in the neighborhood.

Firefighters found at least six butane tanks at the home in Oakland County's Commerce Township, Fire Chief Jim Dundas said.

"Butane is a very flammable, potentially explosive gas, and it lends itself to the idea that they could have been processing marijuana," Dundas said.

The house was destroyed.

A man in his 20s was in serious condition at a hospital, the county sheriff's office said. Another man in his 20s had minor injuries.

Grizzly kills man in 1st deadly attack at park

AK COPPER CENTER — The hunter killed by a grizzly bear in a remote part of Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve was identified by park officials as a man from Ohio.

The death of Austin Pfeiffer, 22, was the first recorded fatal bear attack in the park since it was established in 1980, the park said in a statement.

Pfeiffer was hunting with a friend and they were salvaging meat from a moose they killed a day earlier when the attack occurred, the statement said.

National Park Service investigators determined it was a surprise attack and that Pfeiffer did not have ready access to a gun or deterrent, like bear-repellant spray, at the time.

Pfeiffer's hunting partner was later evacuated safely from the site, the statement said.

4 ex-eBay employees charged with conspiracy

MA BOSTON — Four former eBay Inc. employees agreed to plead guilty to their roles in a campaign of intimidation that included sending live spiders and cockroaches to the home of a Massachusetts couple who ran an online newsletter critical of the auction site, federal prosecutors said.

The four expected to plead guilty are Brian Gilbert, 51; Stephanie Popp, 32; Stephanie Stockwell, 26; and Veronica Zea, 26, according to The Boston Globe. All live in San Jose, Calif., except for Stockwell, who lives in Redwood City, Calif.

They are among seven former eBay employees charged in the case, in which the Massachusetts couple had other disturbing items sent to their home, including a funeral wreath and a bloody pig Halloween mask.

Feds issues charges for 17 drug traffickers

SC COLUMBIA — Federal authorities announced charges against 17 people accused of being a part of a drug trafficking organization in South Carolina.

The announcement was made after a two-year investigation in the Lexington area resulted in the seizure of approximately 77 pounds of meth, more than 100 guns and various amounts of heroin and fentanyl, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of South Carolina said in a news release.

Federal authorities said the case identified Alecia Youngblood and Matthew Ward of Lexington as "key methamphetamine suppliers" in the area. Prosecutors said Ward,

36, was found to be the leader of the trafficking organization, which is accused of moving drugs across state lines and dealing unlicensed firearms.

Headstones violated at Buddhist cemetery

HI HONOLULU — Police in Hawaii opened an investigation following the desecration of headstones at an Oahu cemetery.

Headstones were toppled at the Waianae cemetery on the western side of the island, The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported.

The Honolulu Police Department said a family submitted a report of vandalism and the department started a desecration investigation at the cemetery.

Desecration is a misdemeanor, but the law was amended in 2002 to increase the penalty to one year in jail, a fine of up to \$10,000 or both.

TSA: Guns found at every airport in state

TN MEMPHIS — Loaded guns were found at security checkpoints at every major Tennessee airport during a seven-day period, officials said.

From Sept. 13 through Sept. 20, eight guns were found in carry-on bags by agents at Nashville International Airport, Memphis International Airport, Chattanooga Metropolitan Airport, Tri-Cities Airport in Blountville and McGhee Tyson Airport near Knoxville, the Transportation Security Administration said in a news release.

Despite a drop in passengers due to the coronavirus pandemic, TSA officers have found 106 firearms at Tennessee airports this year. A total of 139 were detected in 2019, the

agency said.

2 charged with theft of 17 guns from store

MA BOSTON — Two Connecticut men were charged with stealing 17 guns during a break-in last month at a Massachusetts gun store, federal prosecutors said in a statement.

Fernando Rivera, 24, and Christian Castro, 29, were each charged with stealing guns from a federal firearms licensee, according to the office of the U.S. attorney for Massachusetts, Andrew Lelling.

Rivera and Castro were among several people in two cars who drove from Connecticut through Massachusetts to Vermont and New Hampshire stealing or trying to steal from ATMs along the way, prosecutors said.

On their way back to Connecticut on Aug. 29, they stopped at a West Springfield gun store. Three men got out of the cars and broke into the store by using a crowbar to smash the door, authorities said.

Bank manager finds diamond at state park

AR LITTLE ROCK — A bank manager discovered a 9.07-carat diamond at a state park in southwestern Arkansas after thinking the precious gem was a piece of glass.

Kevin Kinard of Maumelle found the second-largest diamond in the 48-year history of Crater of Diamonds State Park on Labor Day, according to a news release from Arkansas State Parks.

Kinard said he and his friends hauled sifting equipment to the state park in Murfreesboro.

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Nadal chasing history at French Open

Associated Press

For all of the many qualities contributing to Rafael Nadal's unprecedented superiority at the French Open — the bull-whip of a high-bouncing lefty forehand, the reflex returns, the cover-every-corner athleticism, the endless energy and grit — there's one element that stands above all the rest.

According to the opponent Nadal beat in the last two finals in Paris, anyway.

"You go into the match knowing that even your best tennis, even if you play it over three, four hours, might not be enough. I mean, if you do it, you maybe have a little chance, but you have to go to your limit on every single rally, every single point," Dominic Thiem, who won the U.S. Open less than two weeks ago, told The Associated Press.

"That makes it not easy to go into the match," Thiem said. "And that's the mental part, I guess."

When main-draw competition begins Sunday at Roland

Garros, Thiem and every other player in the men's bracket will be pursuing Nadal as the 34-year-old from Spain pursues history.

If Nadal manages to claim a 13th French Open championship — extending his own record for the most singles trophies won by anyone at any major tennis tournament — he would, more significantly, also collect his 20th Grand Slam title overall, tying Roger Federer's record for a man.

Nadal's tally elsewhere: four U.S. Opens, two Wimbledons, one Australian Open.

He spoke Friday in Paris about what "probably are the most difficult conditions for me ever in Roland Garros" — a lack of matches in 2020; a new brand of tennis balls ("super slow, heavy"); cooler weather and plenty of rain in the forecast.

"But you know what?" Nadal said. "I am here to fight and to play with the highest intensity possible."

Asked recently about the

possibility of catching the 39-year-old Federer, out for the rest of the season after a pair of operations on his right knee, Nadal expressed a sentiment he's uttered before.

Climbing the Grand Slam list, Nadal said, is "not an obsession at all."

"I know that you put a lot of attention on all of this," he replied when the topic was raised last week at the Italian Open, Nadal's first tournament since February because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Of course I would love to finish my career with 25, but (that's) something that probably will not happen. I'm going to keep fighting to produce chances, and then when I finish my career, let's see, no?" he said. "I just want to keep enjoying tennis. And that's it. If I am playing well, I know I normally have my chances. If not, going to be impossible. That's it."

There is, of course, another great of the game playing during this era and, like Nadal, gaining on Federer.

That would be No. 1-ranked Novak Djokovic, who had won five of seven major titles to raise his total to 17 before being disqualified at the U.S. Open for accidentally hitting a line judge with a ball while walking to a changeover.

In this oddest of years, the Grand Slam season will drawing to a close in France; the clay-court major was postponed from May until now because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Roland Garros is the last Slam, the last opportunity of this season. So we all know who the main favorite is there: Obviously, it's Nadal. And everything that he has achieved there, losing maybe a couple matches in his entire career on that court ... is probably the most impressive record that anybody has on any court," Djokovic said. "So, yeah, of course you would put him right there in front as a favorite to win it."

For the record: Nadal has won 93 of 95 matches in the French Open and his last 21 in a row.

MAC returns with six-game season beginning Nov. 4

Associated Press

The Mid-American Conference, the first major college football league to postpone its season because of the pandemic, became the final one to jump back in, making it 10 out of 10 conferences that will play in the fall.

As university presidents in the Big Ten, Pac-12 and Mountain West have done over the past 10 days, MAC leaders on Friday voted unanimously to reverse their August decision to push football to spring. The MAC will instead open its season Nov. 4.

Just like the other conferences returning to fall ball, the MAC cited advancements in COVID-19 antigen testing as key to the change of direction. The conference will begin testing athletes four times per week, starting Oct 5.

If all goes well, by the first weekend of November, there will be college football from coast to coast. That seemed highly unlikely throughout much of the summer as the United States struggled to contain a virus that has killed more than 200,000 people across the country.

The pandemic is still not under control in many states, but college football will go on in front of empty stadiums or limited attendance.

"The risk of college football spreading the virus is much less than the risk of fraternity parties or off-campus parties or concerts that are happening," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease expert and senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security. "The risk is much more for coronavirus off

the field than it is on the field."

The MACtion will start on a Wednesday, of course, and the championship game will be played Dec. 18 or 19. A full schedule will be released later, along with the conference's full medical protocols.

"Our decisions, in August and again today, have been guided by an overriding concern for the well-being of the student athletes, institutions, and the community at large," Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher said. "Our medical advisory group, presidents, directors of athletics, and others, have worked hard to develop a plan that provides the opportunity for student athletes to compete."

Northern Illinois athletic director Sean Frazier, who along with NIU's president pushed hard for the postponement, said he felt good about the MAC's new protocols.

"No one was more hesitant than me," he said. But, he added, the MAC's doctors and experts "made me a believer."

The MAC, a 12-school league of mostly Midwestern schools with relatively small athletic budgets, postponed all fall sports on Aug. 8. Within a few days, the Mountain West, Big Ten and Pac-12 had done the same.

Six conferences, including the Southeastern, Atlantic Coast and Big 12, held firm but the major college football season started Labor Day weekend with 40% of the teams that play at the highest level of Division I having announced they would sit it out. There have already been plenty of disruptions to the schedule, but the SEC started Saturday, the Big Ten is set to kickoff Oct. 24 and the Pac-12 on Nov. 7.

Celtics outlast Heat, avoid elimination

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Their season saved for at least two more days, Boston coach Brad Stevens offered the most succinct assessment of his Celtics.

“We’re prideful,” Stevens said.

Celtic Pride. It was on display Friday night — when Jayson Tatum and his teammates announced very loudly that they’re not ready to see the world that exists outside the NBA’s restart bubble quite yet.

Tatum had 31 points and 10 rebounds, Jaylen Brown added 28 points and the Celtics shook off a slow first half to top the Miami Heat 121-108 in Game 5 of the Eastern Conference finals and stave off elimination.

“Our deal was to come out and play, come out and compete, give it our best shot and I thought we played pretty well in the second half,” Stevens

said. “But we’re going to have to do it again and again because of the position we’re in.”

The Heat lead the series 3-2, with Game 6 on Sunday.

Daniel Theis had 15 points and 13 rebounds for the Celtics, who trailed by 12 early but outscored Miami 41-25 in the third quarter and never looked back. Kemba Walker scored 15 points, Marcus Smart had a 12-point, eight-rebound, eight-assist night and Gordon Hayward scored 10 for the Celtics.

Goran Dragic scored 23 points before fouling out with 4:27 left for Miami, which got 20 from Duncan Robinson.

“It’s certainly not going to be easy,” Robinson said. “We’ve got to band together to do difficult things.”

Jimmy Butler scored 17, Tyler Herro and Jae Crowder each had 14 and Bam Adebayo 13 for the Heat — which could get nothing to fall from three-

point range.

Miami was 7-for-36 from beyond the arc, now shooting 24.8% on threes in its last 13 quarters — after shooting 38.3% on those in the playoffs before that drought.

“Boston played great in that second half,” Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. “They deserved and earned what they got. We understand how tough it is to win in the playoffs. We did not compete hard enough defensively and we paid the price for that. But you do have to credit Boston. They played with great force.”

Brown made back-to-back threes in the fourth quarter to turn an eight-point lead into a 103-89 margin with 8:05 left, and things weren’t in doubt again. He turned to blow a kiss to the Heat bench after the second of those threes, reminiscent of something Herro did during his 37-point barrage in

Game 4.

Game on. Series on.

“It’s not going to be perfect,” Tatum said. “You just want to give yourself a chance.”

The opening minutes didn’t go according to plan for Boston, which missed 11 of its first 12 shots, committed four turnovers in that dismal stretch to make matters even worse, and got into a 17-5 hole early.

But the Celtics weathered all that and, even after shooting only 40% in the first half, only trailed 58-51 at the break — never leading, but never letting Miami get too far removed from view.

The Heat scored the first basket of the third quarter. The next few minutes were all Celtics.

They went on a 13-0 run over a stretch of only 3:06 to turn a nine-point deficit into a 64-60 lead, and the game changed just that fast.

Watt brothers set for family reunion in Pittsburgh

Associated Press

Growing up in Wisconsin, the sibling rivalry between the Watt brothers had no boundaries. Out front playing roller hockey. In the backyard playing football. Mini-baseball in the basement. Even the kitchen table at grandma’s was not immune.

As kids, J.J., T.J. and Derek would spend hours at their grandmother’s house, sipping their “special drink” of Sprite and cranberry juice in sippy cups while playing gin rummy, where their great-grandmother offered proof the family’s competitive streak runs deep. Really deep.

“Great grandma, even when she was 100 years old, takes no prisoners,” said J.J., the star defensive end for the Houston Texans. “When that’s the attitude of your 100-, 101-year-old (great-) grandma, it kind of trickles down throughout the whole family.”

On Sunday, the Watt brothers will play a much higher stakes game when J.J.’s Texans look to avoid an 0-3 start as they visit Derek and T.J.’s undefeated Steelers (2-0). It will be just the second time since 1927 that three brothers will appear in the same NFL game.

“It’s incredible. It’s special,” said J.J., at 31 the oldest of the bunch. “It’s a testament to our parents and everything that they did and all the people in our lives — our coaches, our trainers, everybody who helped us get here. It’s going to be very, very cool.”

If not exactly warm and fuzzy, J.J. is actually looking for a bit of payback against Derek after something the fullback did last season when he played for the Chargers in a loss to the Texans.

“I won the game so it doesn’t matter, but yeah, he tossed a chip in the ribs,” J.J. said. “That’s what he does. He’s a pesky little fullback. He sticks

his elbow in your ribs as you’re pass rushing and then he goes on his way. We’ll see what happens on Sunday.”

Derek, the middle brother at 27, laughed at the memory and expects to have a run-in or two with big brother’s familiar No. 99.

“I think I got him pretty good and he tried to play a spin move with it,” said Derek, who signed a three-year deal with the Steelers in March. “But I am sure if he finds an opportunity this game he will definitely try to get me back for it. But I don’t see him going out of his way, that’s for sure.”

That would simply be against the Watt way. John and Connie Watt instilled in their sons at a young age the importance of selfless hard work. They shooed them out of the house in Pewaukee, Wisc. — about a half-hour west of Milwaukee — and the three boys became the de facto sports commissioners of the neighborhood.

“We were trying to get as many people, as many kids in the community to come over our house and play as many sports as we possibly could,” said T.J., the baby of the bunch at 26.

Some things never change. The Watts spent a portion of their offseason co-hosting a game show called “Ultimate Tag,” and are currently starring in a series of Subway commercials featuring mom and dad.

Yet even as their stars have risen — as tends to happen when you’re a three-time Defensive Player of the Year like J.J., or a 2019 All-Pro with a rapidly growing reputation as one of the best outside linebackers in the NFL in T.J. — their private lives remain relatively simple. Their group chats focus on Derek’s son Logan, J.J. complaining about the heat in Houston; and T.J. being well, T.J., but staying as quiet as possible.

Lightning close in on Stanley Cup title

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Kevin Shattenkirk will never forget having his contract bought out in the summer of 2019 and joining the Tampa Bay Lightning because he felt their core players had a similar chip on their shoulders after a shocking first-round exit.

More than a year later, he created a moment to remember to put the Lightning on the verge of making good on years of unfulfilled potential.

Shattenkirk scored a power-play goal in overtime after a questionable penalty, and the Lightning beat the Dallas Stars 5-4 Friday night to take a 3-

1 lead in the final and move a victory away from lifting the Stanley Cup. With Game 5 on Saturday night, Tampa Bay was potentially 24 hours away from its second championship in franchise history after winning it in 2004.

“Looking forward to tomorrow night because then it could all come really full circle,” Shattenkirk said.

It almost is for a core group that has so far been unable to get over the hump despite being one of the best teams in the NHL for much of the past decade. Shattenkirk came over after the New York Rangers let him go, but guys like Nikita

Kucherov, Victor Hedman, Ondrej Palat, Tyler Johnson and Andrei Vasilevskiy and coach Jon Cooper have been around a while and are focused on finishing this.

“They came here to do something,” Cooper said. “They’re on their way, but we’ve said all along, we haven’t won anything yet. We still have to win one more and we’re not taking anything for granted.”

It was another dominant performance by top players who looked exactly like they wouldn’t be denied after getting this far. Point, the Lightning’s top center, scored consecutive goals at the end of the first peri-

od and start of the second, creating and sustaining the kind of momentum that has been so important in the playoffs.

The Lightning got the winning power play when Dallas captain Jamie Benn was called for tripping Tyler Johnson on a play where Benn’s skates never made contact with Johnson’s as trailing referee Francis Charon called it.

“I don’t have a ton of time for a play where Tyler Johnson steps in front of Jamie Benn and it has no real effect in the play, and Jamie breathes on him and the guy falls over,” said Stars veteran Joe Pavelski, who scored twice.

MLB roundup

Marlins top Yankees, earn first playoff berth since 2003

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Marlins clinched an improbable playoff berth in their coronavirus-decimated season, beating the New York Yankees 4-3 in 10 innings Friday night to seal a postseason trip.

Miami earned its first postseason trip since 2003 when it won the World Series as the Florida Marlins, capped by a Game 6 victory in the Bronx over Miami owner Derek Jeter and his New York teammates at the previous version of Yankee Stadium.

The Marlins had the worst record in the NL last year at 57-105, then were beset by a virus outbreak early this season that prevented them from playing for more than a week.

Reds 7, Twins 2: Mike Moustakas homered twice, Freddy Galvis hit a solo shot and visiting Cincinnati clinched its first playoff spot since 2013, beating AL Central-leading Minnesota.

The Reds (30-28), who can finish as high as the fifth seed in the eight-team NL field, leaned on their bullpen and raised their record to two

games above .500 for the first time since May 13, 2017.

Rangers 5, Astros 4 (10): Houston clinched the final spot in the AL playoffs, despite a 10-inning loss at Texas, after the Angels lost to the Dodgers.

The Astros were a strike away from clinching a franchise-best fourth straight postseason berth themselves when Ronald Guzman hit a tying solo home run in the bottom of the ninth inning for the last-place Rangers, who stopped a four-game losing streak.

Dodgers 9, Angels 5: Justin Turner homered twice and AJ Pollock, Will Smith and Edwin Rios also went deep as the Dodgers rallied to beat the Angels.

The loss mathematically eliminated the Angels from postseason contention, and gave the final AL playoff spot to the Houston Astros.

Braves 8, Red Sox 7 (11): Freddie Freeman hit a two-run homer to lead off the 11th inning and host Atlanta beat Boston to clinch the No. 2 seed in the National League playoffs.

Indians 4, Pirates 3: Cesar Hernandez ripped an RBI double into the right-field cor-

ner with two outs in the ninth inning as Cleveland rallied for its third its hopes alive for winning the AL Central.

Rays 6, Phillies 4: Joey Wendle had a go-ahead, two-run single in the eighth inning and AL East champion Tampa Bay rallied to hurt visiting Philadelphia’s playoff hopes.

The Rays are looking to finish with the AL’s best record for the second time, after topping the league in 2010.

Athletics 3, Mariners 1: Mark Canha hit a two-out, two-run home run in the 10th inning, lifting host Oakland over Seattle.

The A’s (35-22) moved past the Minnesota Twins (35-23) in the race for the second seed in the AL. Oakland had lost three of four and five of 11.

Giants 5-5, Padres 4-6: Trent Grisham hit a game-ending, three-run homer with one out in the seventh inning, lifting San Diego to a doubleheader split with host San Francisco after ace Dinelson Lamet left the game with an apparent injury.

Diamondbacks 4-11, Rockies 0-5: Josh VanMeter hit a three-run homer, David Per-

alta and Tim Lincecum both had three hits and host Arizona earned a doubleheader sweep over Colorado.

Blue Jays 10, Orioles 5: Randal Grichuk and Travis Shaw homered, Nate Pearson returned from an elbow injury to pitch 1²/₃ scoreless innings and playoff-bound Toronto beat visiting Baltimore.

Brewers 3-1, Cardinals 0-9: Daniel Ponce de Leon pitched one-hit ball for six innings, Tommy Edman hit a two-run homer and St. Louis earned a doubleheader split against Milwaukee.

In the opener, Christian Yelich homered and Brent Suter combined with Devin Williams and Josh Hader on a five-hitter for the Brewers in a 3-0 win.

Royals 3, Tigers 2: Brad Keller threw six scoreless innings, Adalberto Mondesi had three hits and an RBI as host Kansas City held off Detroit.

Cubs 10, White Sox 0: Yu Darvish pitched seven strong innings for his NL-leading eighth win, Willson Contreras homered twice and the Cubs moved to the brink of clinching the NL Central title by pounding the crosstown White Sox.