

SPORTS

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SPORTS
IN BRIEFLedecky swims
to AP Female
Athlete of the
Year honors

Katie Ledecky got her start in swimming because she just wanted to make friends. Her brother was eager to join a team at a pool near their house and as a 6-year-old, she tagged along.

By summer's end, the Ledecky siblings had made 100 friends ranging in age from 6 to 18. Some of them remain good friends with Katie, who went on to become the world's best swimmer in the post-Michael Phelps era.

She earned five golds and a silver at this year's world championships in Budapest, maintaining the upward trajectory she first established as a surprise gold medalist at the 2012 London Olympics.

Her dominant performance in Hungary earned Ledecky Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year honors.

In balloting by U.S. editors and news directors announced Tuesday, Ledecky received 351 points, edging out Serena Williams with 343. Williams won the Australian Open for her Open era-record 23rd Grand Slam tennis title.



Katie
Ledecky

Astros star Altuve
named AP Male
Athlete of the Year

HOUSTON — Jose Altuve led the Houston Astros to their first World Series title with a win over the Los Angeles Dodgers in November and picked up the franchise's first MVP trophy in more than two decades a couple of weeks later.

And as his huge 2017 is coming to a close, the diminutive second baseman already is looking for more.

"Winning the World Series, winning the MVP, you feel like you have everything," Altuve told The Associated Press. "But my perspective is to try and get better every year and if we win one World Series, why not win another one? Just keep playing for the team and keep playing for my city."

Altuve, who was one of only a handful of players who endured the Astros' painful rebuilding process en route to this year's championship, which gave hope to a city ravaged by Hurricane Harvey, was chosen as The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year.



Jose
Altuve

Els invited
to Augusta
National, but not
to play Masters

Ernie Els says he received an invitation to Augusta National for the first week in April. It just wasn't an invitation to play in the Masters.

Els had to clarify a tweet from Sunday that said: "Thank you for a Great Xmas present! @TheMasters Can't wait!" That led several media sites to post stories that Els, a four-time major champion, had received a special exemption into the Masters.

Instead, the 48-year-old South African received a letter welcoming him as an honorary invitee. His five-year exemption into the Masters from winning the 2012 British Open ended last year. Augusta National has a tradition of inviting past major champions as honorary guests for the week.

Els tweeted Monday: "Wanted to clarify my excitement getting an invite from @TheMasters. Work continues to qualify to compete!"

— Associated Press



AP Photo/Michael Ainsworth

Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Dez Bryant defends as Seattle Seahawks linebacker K.J. Wright intercepts a pass.

Gritty Seahawks keep playoff
hopes alive in final week

By SCHUYLER DIXON

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Already missing two of their defensive stars for the season, the Seattle Seahawks were coming off their most-lopsided loss under coach Pete Carroll and facing Ezekiel Elliott in his return to the Dallas Cowboys after two of their worst showings against the run this year.

The Seahawks are still fighting for their sixth straight trip to the playoffs after a 21-12 victory Sunday. The Cowboys are out.

"We've been doing this since I've been here the past seven years," said linebacker K.J. Wright, who had one of two interceptions against Dak Prescott, the other returned for a touchdown by Justin Coleman.

"Whenever our backs are against the wall, we just find a way to bounce back. We could have easily taken the loss against the Rams, come back, pouted and moaned all throughout the week."

Instead they won despite a career-low 93 yards passing from Russell Wilson, who threw two touchdown passes to get to 32 for the season, within two of his career high.

The Seahawks won despite just 136 yards total offense — fewest since beating the then-St. Louis Rams in 2013 — because that defense missing safety Kam Chancellor and

UP NEXT: SEAHAWKS

- Arizona Cardinals (7-8)
- at Seattle Seahawks (9-6)
- Sunday, 1:25 p.m. TV: FOX

cornerback Richard Sherman, not to mention end Cliff Avril, forced three turnovers. Each led to one of the touchdowns, highlighted by Coleman's 30-yard return to put Seattle in front for good in the third quarter.

Seattle (9-6) was eliminated in the NFC West race because the Los Angeles Rams beat Jacksonville 27-23 a week after a 42-7 blow-out of the Seahawks. But Seattle still has a shot at the postseason with a win at home against Arizona and an Atlanta loss to Carolina next Sunday.

"Adversity to me is all the same," said receiver Doug Baldwin, who had one of the touchdown catches on a 6-yarder for the final margin. "It's another mountain that you have to climb. So a lot of the guys in this room look toward things we've had to overcome as motivation that we can win with the struggles we're facing now."

Things to consider after the Seahawks avoided a third straight December loss for the first time since 2010 — another time they bounced back because they made the playoffs

at 7-9 and won a wild-card game at home:

ELLIOTT'S RETURN: The Cowboys (8-7) didn't look much better offensively with last year's NFL rushing leader back after the ban over domestic violence allegations. If they are to contend in 2018 after missing the playoffs following a 13-3 season in the debuts of Prescott and Elliott, the passing game will have to get back on track.

Prescott had four interceptions last year while setting a rookie record for passer rating. He has four pick-sixes this season and 13 interceptions overall, the most for a Dallas quarterback since Tony Romo matched his career high with 19 in 2012. Elliott's 97 yards on 24 carries didn't make much difference.

"This year was tough," Prescott said. "We know we are not making the postseason, but hopefully it will motivate us."

LOOKING AHEAD: Seattle safety Earl Thomas, going into the last year of his contract and a candidate for salary cap savings if he is cut, visited receiver Dez Bryant in the Cowboys locker room after the game and told Dallas coach Jason Garrett, "If they kick me to the curb, come get me."

"When I say 'Come get me,' I don't mean now," said Thomas, who has made offseason appearances with Bryant. "But when Seattle kicks me to the curb, please, the Cowboys come get me. That's the only place I'd rather be."

Villanova still at No. 1, top 4 of new AP Top 25 unchanged

By AARON BEARD

Associated Press

Villanova stayed comfortably at No. 1 in an AP Top 25 poll that offered little change at the top.

The top four teams stayed the same in Monday's new poll, led by the Wildcats (12-0) receiving 43 of 65 first-place votes to stay at No. 1 for the third straight week. No. 2 Michigan State (12-1) was second and had 16 first-place votes, while third-ranked Arizona State (12-0) had six first-place votes to stay ahead of No. 4 Duke (12-1).

Those four teams won their six games last week by an average margin of 39.7 points, leaving their coaches to focus on tuning elements of their games before the bulk of conference play takes hold.

"I guess if you were to ask me where do you want to be at Christmas: would you like to be winning games by an average of 20 points a game ... and can you be 12-1?" Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said after last week's 102-60 win against Long Beach State. "I think I'd have taken that. Plus I'm seeing improvement."

For the preseason No. 1 Blue Devils, in particular, a lighter December schedule due to exams and the holidays has offered some needed practice time following a travel-filled opening month.



AP Photo/Julio Cortez

Villanova head coach Jay Wright.

"We had some good practices so we looked better defensively and hopefully we will continue to do that," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said after last week's 104-40 win against Evansville. "Once we get back we have a tough game (against No. 24 Florida State), but we'll have more continuity. And that's what this group needs, a young group especially needs the continuity."

Changes in the top 10

Texas A&M (11-1) climbed to

fifth, followed by Xavier, West Virginia, Wichita State, Virginia and TCU to round out the top 10. Those teams all climbed between three and five spots.

TCU (12-0) has the nation's longest winning streak at 17 games dating to last season's NIT championship after Friday's win against William & Mary, and now has the highest ranking in program history.

Top risers

Joining TCU in rising five spots

is No. 12 Oklahoma, led by freshman star Trae Young. No. 9 Virginia is up four spots.

Longest slides

Four ranked teams took big slides after losses to unranked opponents last week.

Miami and Kentucky both fell nine spots to Nos. 15 and 16 in the biggest slides of the week after the Hurricanes lost to New Mexico State in the Diamond Head Classic and the Wildcats lost to UCLA in the CBS Sports Classic in New Orleans.

Reigning national champion North Carolina fell eight spots to No. 13 after its home loss to Wofford, snapping a 23-game home winning streak. Now-No. 20 Gonzaga also fell eight spots after its loss to San Diego State.

Standing pat

In addition to the four teams at the top, four more teams — No. 18 Baylor, No. 23 Seton Hall, No. 24 Florida State and No. 25 Creighton — stayed in the same spot as last week.

No new faces

There were no newcomers or departures from this week's poll, with 11 teams climbing and six falling in addition to the eight staying in the same slot.