

FDR won't be the Nationals' Latest Racing President

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FULL TEXT

A mascot of President Franklin D. Roosevelt -- in a wheelchair or otherwise -- won't be joining Racing Presidents George, Tom, Abe, Teddy and Bill at Nationals Park this season.

"While we engaged in extensive efforts to have FDR as a visiting Racing President for the 2017 season, in light of logistical challenges and lack of enthusiasm from the Roosevelt family, we were not comfortable proceeding," a Nationals spokesperson said in a statement Wednesday.

There was speculation that Roosevelt would become the latest visiting Racing President in 2017 after mascot versions of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, who preceded FDR in the Oval Office, roamed the concourses, and participated in the fourth-inning Presidents Race in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Coolidge and Hoover, who have since retired to the team's new spring training home in West Palm Beach, Fla., joined the Rushmores (and Taft) on a one-year basis as part of the Nationals' multiyear partnership with the nonprofit, nonpartisan White House Historical Association. Their inclusion helped promote the WHHA's annual Christmas ornament, which typically honors individual presidents chosen in sequential order. This year's ornament is expected to be dedicated to Roosevelt.

The possibility of a Racing President celebrating Roosevelt, who contracted polio in 1921 at age 39 and spent much of the rest of his life in a wheelchair, led to questions about how he would be depicted. In accordance with FDR's wishes, he was rarely photographed in his wheelchair during his four terms as president from 1933 until his death in 1945.

In a letter to the editor last May, a reader suggested that FDR should race in a wheelchair:

In his April 23 Free for All letter, "Put off by this reference," Harry Meem asked whether it was meant to be a joke when the April 12 Sports article "The debut of 'Herbie' is a real eye-catcher" suggested that "If the tradition of choosing presidents [to race] sequentially continues, fans can expect to see FDR at Nationals Park next season." Joke or not, I have been saying for years that the Nationals should have Franklin D. Roosevelt race -- in a wheelchair.

"Generally, we're not in favor of hiding a person's disability," Zach Baldwin, the outreach director for the American Association of People with Disabilities, told Washingtonian's Benjamin Freed last year. "We're in favor of highlighting and showing that FDR used a wheelchair. I don't know the logistics on how you get a mascot in a

wheelchair to make that work, but there could be ways to make it work. You look at people who engage in wheelchair basketball and racing, you can have a chair built for speed."

A Nationals spokesperson said there will only be five Racing Presidents this season. The spokesman added the team's partnership with the WHHA will continue, though details are still being finalized, and it's too early to say whether a visiting Racing President -- Harry Truman, perhaps -- will be added in 2018.

Controversy over how to depict FDR in the years after his death is nothing new. When a \$48 million memorial to Roosevelt opened along the Tidal Basin in 1997, it didn't feature a statue showing FDR in a wheelchair.

"There are those who insist that the only way to show Roosevelt's handicap is to redo one of the sculptures to show the President publicly in a wheelchair," Lester S. Hyman of the memorial commission wrote in a letter to the National Organization on Disability in June 1996. "This we will not do because it would be historically inaccurate."

After a six-year campaign led by disability advocacy groups, President Clinton unveiled a statue depicting Roosevelt seated in his wheelchair at the FDR Memorial in January 2001.

DETAILS

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