



Congressman: Stop horsing around with sports votes

By JIM ABRAMS, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- House Democrats and Republicans have put aside their differences this year to honor the likes of golfer Phil Mickelson, the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team, NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson and the Penn State women's volleyball team.

But when it came time this week to memorialize the start of the 142nd season of the Saratoga race course in New York, one freshman lawmaker decided he'd had enough. "It's an absolute embarrassment," said Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, announcing on the House floor a vow to vote against all future sports resolutions. He worried that there were kids in the visitors' gallery who would go back home and, asked whether Congress was talking about war or debt, reply: "Oh no, they were honoring a race course."

"It's terribly frustrating," Chaffetz said.

The freshman Republican did appear to win a few converts: The bill passed by a mere 396-14, a high number of "no" votes for the kind of commemorative resolutions that often pass unanimously.

Every week the House spends a couple of days churning out such non-controversial bills. Beyond honoring sports achievements, they name post offices, praise armed service members, mourn distinguished people who've died and recognize historic anniversaries. This year the House has come together to support national pollinator week, national dairy month and national train day.

Chaffetz, in an interview, said he's got nothing against recognizing worthwhile causes such as breast cancer awareness, "but there are too many of them and they're just too frivolous." He said he drew the line at sports bills because athletes already get "more than their fair share of accolades."

Chaffetz gained attention earlier this year when he confronted President Barack Obama at a Republican retreat in Baltimore, accusing Obama of breaking promises to block lobbyists from administration jobs and get rid of special project spending. He sees the resolutions as proof that Democrats are just filling time because of their inability to tackle the larger issues facing the nation.

Democrat Jason Altmire of Pennsylvania, who voted against the race track bill, had a more benign interpretation, saying these minor bills are a way to get lawmakers to the

House floor so they can talk with one another and their party leaders.

Still, he said, "They can get out of hand."

He noted a vote last year commemorating the 2560th anniversary of the birth of Confucius. He said his personal rule was to vote only for sports resolutions honoring teams that had actually won a championship.

Chaffetz drew a rebuke from the Democrat managing the race track bill, Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton of the District of Columbia. "It ill behooves the other side to trivialize a bill by a member," she said.

And she recalled that Chaffetz had co-sponsored a resolution commending the Real Salt Lake Soccer Club - from his home state of Utah - for winning the 2009 Major League Soccer Cup.

Chaffetz acknowledged backing sports resolutions before realizing they were a waste of time. As a new lawmaker, he said, "I made some mistakes."

Chaffetz and Altmire agree that the House should look for a better way to pay tribute to lawmakers' hometown sports heroes, such as having a big bill at the end of the year for all the sports resolutions.

The Senate also passes hundreds of such minor resolutions every year, but almost always without debate or roll call votes.

The House procedure known as the "suspension calendar" that is now used to quickly debate and approve non-controversial matters such as post office namings dates back to at least 1822. House historian Fred Beuttler noted that in 1978 the House honored Bob Hope on his 75th birthday with both a resolution and a rendition of "Happy Birthday." But Beuttler said he was surprised to find that it's only been about a dozen years since congratulatory resolutions, which in the past concentrated on praising foreign countries, took to praising athletes.