

Florida man set to finish MLB trumpet anthem tour in Atlanta

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The (Fort Myers, Fla.) News-Press
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Jim Doepke cradled the brass trumpet while sitting behind home plate in the Marlins Park stands, reflecting upon an 11-year journey in which he will have performed the national anthem at all 30 MLB stadiums.

Doepke's rendition of the anthem clocks in at about 56 seconds. After years of planning, pleading and submitting audition clips to each of the 30 teams, he got in the door for what has combined to be about a half hour of playing.

"There's a lot of time that goes on behind the scenes," Doepke said after playing for the Marlins in front of the Miami Jackson High School junior ROTC color guard on Sept. 10. "And there's a lot of waiting. But once you go out there and play, it's over pretty fast."

The Estero, Florida, resident from Waukesha, Wisconsin, has played in the heat and the cold. He has played indoors and outdoors. He has played in front of crowds as small as 7,215 at Marlins Park and as large as 43,732 on July 13 at Citizens Bank Park in Philadelphia.

Oh, say has he played.

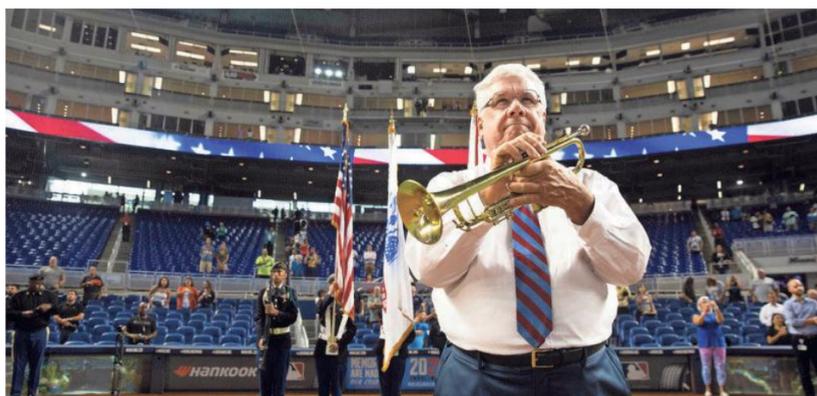
By the time Doepke is scheduled to complete his quest early Thursday afternoon at SunTrust Park in Atlanta, he will have played in front of announced crowds of more than 800,000 paying fans, minus those stuck in traffic or unable to witness the military-style spectacle.

Doepke's quest began with a letter of recommendation from former MLB commissioner Bud Selig. It ends with attention from current commissioner Robert Manfred.

"Our sport is fortunate to have many great traditions that result from the talents of loyal fans," Manfred said. "We appreciate Jim's dedication and commitment to sharing his skills with fans at all 30 ballparks."

MLB could not confirm Doepke becoming the first person to perform the anthem at all 30 ballparks. But because MLB does not track anthem performers, it could not deny the feat either. With SunTrust Park being just 2 years old, Doepke is most certainly the first anthem performer to hit all 30 current ballparks.

"Well, I can't confirm that he's the only one," said Frank Coonely, president of the Pirates. "But what I can say is it's a fabulous accomplishment. It could only be accomplished by somebody with the incredible determination to get the job done. It took persistence on his part to continue to knock on doors. It's a fabulous, fabulous testament to his per-



Jim Doepke performs the national anthem on his 53-year-old trumpet at Marlins Park. He is set to perform today at the Braves' Sun Trust Park to complete a tour of all 30 MLB stadiums that began in 2008. WANGYUXUAN XU/NAPLES (FLA.) DAILY NEWS

sistence and determination."

Coonely approached Doepke (pronounced DUP-key) after his anthem performance last Aug. 4 at PNC Park in Pittsburgh not just to congratulate him but to get to know him.

"I was intrigued by his mission," Coonely said. "I talked to him about where he had been and what his experiences were over the years and how he executed his vision. He loves baseball. He loves America. He thinks baseball and the national anthem are a big part of America, a big part of our country. He has a big passion for them."

There has been a bit of a stigma, Doepke said, about his performances being played and not sung. He often hears fans singing along with his trumpet. The performance resonated with Coonely.

"He did a stellar and great job," Coonely said. "When we go into a realm that is somewhat different for us, I always get a little nervous. A soloist on an instrument is not the norm for most teams. He knocked it out of the park so to speak. I thought it was fabulous, and the crowd really enjoyed it and appreciated it. I let him know that if he runs into any roadblocks in trying to complete his quest, he should feel free to give me a call or email me."

Hurdles encountered

Doepke did just that. He ran into roadblocks in more than a few places.

The Yankees use a prerecorded anthem for all but about a dozen of their 81 home games each season, which made for a longer-than-usual wait there.

The Braves limit their performances to corporate suite holders other than a handful of exceptions each season.

None of the hurdles, however, were greater than with the Angels.

The team has a strict, "no instrumen-

talists" policy. The Pirates' Coonely intervened. He contacted his counterpart there. During a West Coast swing in June, in which Doepke played before the Giants, Dodgers and Padres, the Angels allowed Doepke inside their ballpark to play the anthem at Angels Stadium while the team played on the road.

A man upstairs in a booth stuck his head out of a window and clapped and hooted and hollered after the performance, his cheers reverberating throughout the otherwise empty ballpark. Doepke had an audience of about four, including his wife, Liz, who has accompanied him to all but one of the performances. She traveled as far as Safeco Field in Seattle in 2013 and as near as Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg in 2011. She only missed the White Sox anthem in 2017.

"The California trip covering four stadiums really felt like the project was 'rounding third and heading for home,'" Doepke said. As he walked off the field at Dodgers Stadium on June 17, retired manager Tommy Lasorda said goodbye and told him, "That was a Hall of Fame anthem!"

Doepke, 67, grew up playing the trumpet. He has a Bach Stradivarius, which cost about \$400 when he received it, more than 50 years ago. Considered antiques, they go for more than \$2,200 these days.

His father, World War II veteran Howard Schwartz Doepke, witnessed many of his son's anthems at Brewers' games, including at his 100th birthday in 2015. He died this year at 103. His father's military service inspired Doepke to perform the anthem as well as "Taps" at military funerals and occasions such as Memorial and Veterans Day.

On the eve of the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks while in Miami, Doepke had that in mind for inspiration as well.

Insurmountable task achieved

Doepke has a vast background in music, having attended summer music camp at Northwestern University for three of his high school years. He also took lessons from the lead player with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. He graduated from the University of Kansas, where he returns almost annually to play at Allen Fieldhouse for basketball games. He taught music in Wisconsin at elementary and high schools for 33 years.

In the early 2000s, Doepke began bringing a bugle to Brewers games. He played rally cries for fans in the "Bucket-head" section overlooking the outfield.

Aleta Mercer took notice. As Milwaukee's director of broadcasting and at the time entertainment, booking anthem performers fell under her responsibilities.

"When he was director of a local high school band, the band was incredible," Mercer said of Waukesha North High, which had performed the anthem at Miller Park. "And that was largely due to Jim's direction."

Mercer encouraged Doepke to play the anthem himself.

"He knew music," she said. "He knew how to keep the kids in mind. But he knew how to present the anthem in a fine way."

In 2008, Doepke set the goal to perform at every big league ballpark, setting up anthemacrossamerica.org. Although he had already played numerous times for the Brewers, he considered Fenway Park the first of his quest: May 17, 2008.

"Back in the early part of this project, it felt like the task was going to be insurmountable," Doepke said. "Actually booking, traveling to and playing 30 stadiums. At first, there were just two, then one, then three, then back to one a year."

In 2015, Doepke failed to book any anthems at all. He played three in each of 2016 (Twins, Indians, Reds) and 2017 (White Sox, Rangers, Astros).

"Then in 2018, momentum took over with four anthems," he said. "And this year, the floodgates burst with 10 anthems. I'm enjoying the ride."

Jim Doepke began his quest at baseball's oldest ballpark. He is slated to finish it at the sport's newest. As he prepared to pack his trumpet into its black bag and leave Marlins Park, preparing for one final and historical performance in Atlanta, he marveled at the brass.

"I've thought about buying a new one, but why?" Doepke said of the trumpet, before answering his own question, a somewhat rhetorical one. "It plays great. After 53 years, it's basically a part of me."

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