



SPECIAL REPORT: FORMULA ONE

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Mario Andretti, a Man for All Racing Seasons

By BRAD SPURGEON

Mario Andretti, 72, raced in Formula One from 1968 to 1982, winning 12 Grands Prix and in 1978 becoming only the second American world drivers' champion in the history of the series. Voted Driver of the Quarter Century in 1992 by peers and journalists, Andretti's career also included many other forms of racing. He won the Indianapolis 500 in 1969, the Daytona 500 in 1967 and captured the IndyCar title four times. In 1993, he became the oldest winner of an IndyCar race, at 53 years and 34 days. He took part in the 24 Hours of Le Mans into his 60s, and won a class victory there in 1995. His son, Michael, won the IndyCar title in 1991 and raced one season in Formula One, in 1993, and his grandson, Marco, races in IndyCar. Two weeks ago, Andretti was appointed the official ambassador for the Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas, which will host its first U.S. Grand Prix in November. He spoke recently with Brad Spurgeon of the International Herald Tribune.

Q. Can Formula One finally succeed in the United States at the Austin circuit?

A. I think it has the best chance with this plan. It is all about stability. The fan base has to be looking forward to it, not just, 'Maybe it will happen.' You have to have something solid, and then it begins a tradition. And we have been missing that. Since Watkins Glen, everything has been 'two races here, three races there.' But I think the fan base is good, it is good enough to support it. I have no question about that. They just have to have a home.

It's not going to be: Put up a tent, have a show, take the tent down on Monday. And that's a big difference.

Q. What does Austin have that some of the venues in the past didn't have? Indianapolis was a permanent circuit, too.

A. Well, Indianapolis was a dual-purpose facility. It just lacked the ambiance, and actually the track was not really a very good layout. There was a plan for the future to extend it, which would have improved it

immensely, but it never came to fruition. I, too, thought that was going to be a natural base for it, but it didn't work out.

Now there is no other facility in our country that could be up to standard to host Formula One. Austin will be the best by far, and the only road-racing facility that mirrors what the rest of the world has to offer. And it is about time. In the U.S., we really have fallen short of road-racing facilities that have kept up with the times — unfortunately, but it's a fact. This will be a masterpiece and we should be proud of it.

Q. Where does Formula One fit in with Nascar, IndyCar, Sprint car and all the other forms of racing in the U.S.?

A. Yes, there is a lot of racing and a lot to choose from. But I think there is a uniqueness about Formula One, the international aspect. I think it attracts Nascar fans. Every Nascar driver watches Formula One in the morning; they are well informed. I think there is a definite crossover, Nascar, IndyCar. The reaction I get from fans and so forth, I think they have an open mind and they are racers, period. Like I am. I love all motor sports at the top level. I love sports cars and I love MotoGP, I am all-encompassing.

Q. What was your greatest memory in motor sport?

A. I don't want to be facetious, but every victory is a great memory. No matter how fortunate you are and win races, you never win enough and they are always few and far between. And every victory is like the first one. I tell you, my housekeeper shines every victory trophy the same way — not one over the other — and that's the way it is in my heart.

Q. What about having another Andretti in Formula One?

A. There is nothing I would like to see better than that. And I think Marco would fit the scene perfectly. He's a quick learner. I think the help of having something like this in the U.S., a base, and the need more than ever to have the U.S. represented as a driver. This could probably help the situation with sponsors, and encourage maybe some of the manufacturers here to have that type of presence. I am probably going to become a little more active in that area to try to pull some of these strings.

Q. But it has to be a winner....

A. I have said this before: It's got to be with a top team. And I don't mean just being there competing. You've got to be there with a chance to bring results. That's the only important aspect. Let's face it, Vince Lombardi said it all.

Obviously there is a pride. You know what it is to have your national anthem played in Argentina when you are on the podium? In Germany, in Japan? I was fortunate enough to win races on five continents and represent America. In Italy, they played the Italian national anthem and the U.S. national anthem. It puts things in a totally different perspective. Flying your own flag in the face of the international competition, that plays to another dimension. And that is what Formula One provides.

Q. What do you think about where Formula One stands today as a series?

A. Probably enjoying its best moments. It's at a level that I have never seen before, and that is fabulous. It's got the sophistication beyond words. And it's a show you want to be here now. I don't think we could have written a script better than what the season is. You watch qualifying and you have three or four manufacturers within less than a half a second. And the cars all look so different. Now is that a marvel of technology or what? I love Formula One the way it is today. I just wish I was born 30 years later.

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