



## Andretti at 72: Crowds, compliments never get old to original Super Mario



David Becker/Las Vegas Review-Journal

Mario Andretti, 72, signs an autograph during his visit to Henderson for the grand opening of a Firestone Auto Care store Friday. Andretti is a four-time IndyCar champion and the only driver to win races in four different decades. »

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Retired auto racing star Mario Andretti, left, shown signing an autograph in Henderson on Friday, owns the Mario Andretti Racing Experience at Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

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Mario Andretti is the only driver to have won the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500 and the Formula One World Championship. He is a living legend, an icon, an impresario of his sport, having won races on the dirt at DuQuoin and Springfield and Langhorne; on the international road circuits at Monza and Buenos Aires and Zandvoort; on the domestic ovals at Indianapolis and Milwaukee and Pocono.

Sprint cars, stock cars, sports cars, Indy cars, F1 cars. You name it, he'll haul ass in it.

He could probably drive a roller skate, if you put an engine and a steering wheel in it.

He's a four-time IndyCar champion, the all-time leader in pole positions with 67, second in career wins with 52, the all-time IndyCar leader in laps led and starts. He's the oldest man to win a race, at age 53, the only driver to win in four different decades.

And think about this: When a cop pulls you over for speeding, he doesn't say, "Who in the heck do you think you are? Tony Stewart?" Or, "Who in the heck do you think you are? Dario Franchitti?" No, when a cop pulls you over for doing 62 in a 45-mph zone, the first thing he says is, "Who in the heck do you think you are? Mario Andretti?"

I can think of no greater compliment.

The original Super Mario, age 72, was in Henderson on Friday for the grand opening of a Firestone Complete Auto Care store at Galleria Mall. He granted an interview, cut a ribbon, changed some tires, posed for photos, signed some autographs. Lots of autographs.

Everywhere Mario Andretti goes, people line up to see him, to have their picture taken with him, to chat with him, to share an anecdote about this race or that one, most of which he remembers, the others of which he says he remembers.

"It's definitely a great feeling," said Andretti, looking bronzed and fit and almost noble, in the manner of a Roman centurion, if Roman centurions drove like bats out of hell.

"When you think about it, that's the highest compliment anybody could ever pay you. I've been out of the racecar for a lot of years, and people are still there, and they still remember, and it's kind of heartwarming to remember how deep the fan base was in Indy cars."

Before the fans lined up to tell Mario their stories, I got to tell him one of mine.

After the 1993 race at Phoenix, my wife and I were standing near Victory Lane when he popped the cork on a giant bottle of champagne, as per auto racing custom, and nearly took our heads off.

My wife ran across the track to retrieve the cork, and that turned out to be the last race he ever won. And we saved that cork, not because we thought it might be the last race he would win, but because it was Mario Andretti who had popped it.

Since retiring after the 1994 season, Andretti has become a spokesman for Firestone, MagnaFlow Performance Exhaust, Hot Wheels, Honda and GoDaddy.com. He has opened a winery in California's Napa Valley and a petroleum company in Eureka, Calif., and one of those driving experiences, at Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

He owns a couple of bungalows at the Palms.

On selected IndyCar weekends, he drives a specially equipped two-seat Indy car, giving fans the thrill of a lifetime and/or frightening them half to death. He cheers from the pit box for his grandson Marco Andretti, who drives for Michael Andretti, Mario's son.

The patriarch of the lead-footed Andrettis travels more than 200 days a year, much more than he ever did when winning races and championships around the globe. He has signed roughly a bazillion autographs.

And he said he hasn't gotten a speeding ticket since 1968.

But he once was pulled over in Santa Monica, Calif., during the Long Beach Grand Prix weekend, and you know where this is going.

When the cop asked if he thought he was Mario Andretti, he said, as a matter of fact, yes. And then the cop thought he was being a wiseguy.

When he showed his driver's license, the cop still didn't believe him. And so the great Mario Andretti, the only driver to have won the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500 and the Formula One World Championship, also had to produce his FIA license, which is what one must have to drive in Formula One.

He was let go with a stern warning.

Apparently, this cop must have been an A.J. Foyt fan.

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