

Super Mario: Kelly Taylor gets a chance to interview racing legend Mario Andretti

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Driver Marco Andretti, left, stands by his father Michael, center, and grandfather Mario as the trio wait on pit road for practice to begin at the IndyCar Firestone 550 auto race at Texas Motor Speedway Friday, June 8, 2012, in Fort Worth, Texas. (AP Photo/Ralph Lauer)

Decades after he retired from competitive racing, Mario Andretti remains one of the most identifiable figures in motorsport. Whether it's his Formula One World Championship, his four IndyCar titles or winning races in NASCAR, he's touched fans of almost every type of automotive racing.

He's the only driver to win the combination of an Indy 500 and a Daytona 500 race and a Formula One World Championship and he's the last American ever to win a Formula One race.

His story is also a classic rags-to-riches, American-dream tale: he began his career by racing a 1948 Hudson Hornet Sportsman on dirt tracks near Nazareth, Penn., where his family, virtually broke, settled in 1955.

Andretti was born in Istria, but the family fled to Italy when the Italian state was given to Yugoslavia in the resolution of the Second World War. The Andrettis lived for seven years in Lucca, Italy, from which Mario would make his way to watch racing at the famed race course in Monza.

It was here, inspired by Italian great Alberto Ascari, that Mario would begin his love of racing, and set his sights on the ultimate goal of racing in Formula One. It was here he experienced his greatest triumph and his greatest tragedy: teammate Ronnie Paterson died in hospital after a crash at the start of the 1978 Italian Grand Prix. It was here he lost his teammate — “my best friend” — and won the 1978 Formula One World Championship. It was here that his idol — Ascari — died.

The Road Trip caught up with Andretti in Winnipeg, where he was making a promotional appearance at a dealer for Firestone, one of his longtime sponsors.

RT: Mario, you’ve had some unprecedented success as an American driver in Formula One. As you look back on your career, what are some highlights?

MA: The highlights are always the victories. Obviously, that’s the ultimate reward, that’s why you put the effort in. To be able to win races, win championships and fulfill your goals, that’s what it’s all about. I’ve certainly been very blessed. As you say, Formula One was a very important part of my career, because being born and raised in Italy, that’s really why I fell in love with motorsport to begin with and to be able to dedicate a portion of my career to Formula One and come away with a championship was one of my very ambitious goals.

RT: It really was Formula One that inspired your career, when you were back in Monza and watching Alberto Ascari race and that’s really what drove you into the sport.

MA: Indeed. Exactly. I was 14 years of age when I saw the Italian Grand Prix and I always say that’s when the mould was cast. I said, ‘Dear God, if I can just ask one thing, to help me pursue this career, that’s the only thing I’ll ever ask in my life.’

RT: Monza must hold some bittersweet memories for you. It inspired your career and it was where you clinched the 1978 World Championship but the bittersweet part was how you clinched it and what happened to your teammate.

MA: Well, that was triumph and tragedy all in the same day, and losing my teammate, Ronnie Petersen — my best friend — it was just something that I could not celebrate of course at the end of the day. It’s just one of those things in the sport and in life that unfortunately sometimes becomes part of it and you have to endure. And again, tragedy is always a tragedy.

RT: You’ve raced in a number of series, from Formula One to Champ Car to NASCAR. Which was your favourite?

MA: My specialty was always single-seat, open-wheel race cars, whether it was Formula One or Champ Cars. I loved sports prototypes very much over the years. I dabbled a bit in stock cars but again my absolute favourite was open-wheel cars.

RT: Which track stands out in your mind as your favourite track to drive?

MA: Every track I ever won a race on. (Laughs).

RT: What legacy do you hope to leave behind?

MA: Well, the legacy is obviously that we have a family that is pursuing what I love and what's been part of my professional life. The legacy is that I worked very hard to accomplish something I love more than anything, and that's driving a race car.

RT: Both your sons followed in your footsteps and now your grandson Marco is also racing and threatening to make a move into Formula One at some point in his career. How does that make you feel?

MA: Proud, obviously. For anyone to have your kids, your sons, your grandsons, follow in the family business means a lot of pride and that's what I've been experiencing myself.

RT: North America has had a rocky relationship with Formula One over the years. It cost us the Canadian Grand Prix for a number of years due to restrictions on tobacco advertising. There hasn't been a US Grand Prix for a number of years but now we've got the Canadian Grand Prix back and the US Grand Prix is coming up in November in Austin, Tex. How does that make you feel?

MA: Oh, awesome. It was a long time coming, even though it's only been a couple of years since they pulled away from Indianapolis, but they're coming back in grand style and the North American continent with Canada, with Montreal being such a great event. I was there again this year and it really brings that city to life. Now we have a new venue in Austin with that beautiful, beautiful circuit being built, which is going to definitely be world standard. It's about time we had that in the States as well. So it will reinforce the stability of Formula One in this continent and as a great fan of Formula One, along with millions, this is good, positive things ahead.

To listen to the entire interview with Mario Andretti, go to www.cjob.com and follow the links for the podcast of The Road Trip aired on August 18.

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/wheelsnews/128907-super-mario-kelly-taylor-gets-a-chance-to-interview-racing-legend-mario-andretti>