

# Mario Andretti's adventures at Daytona

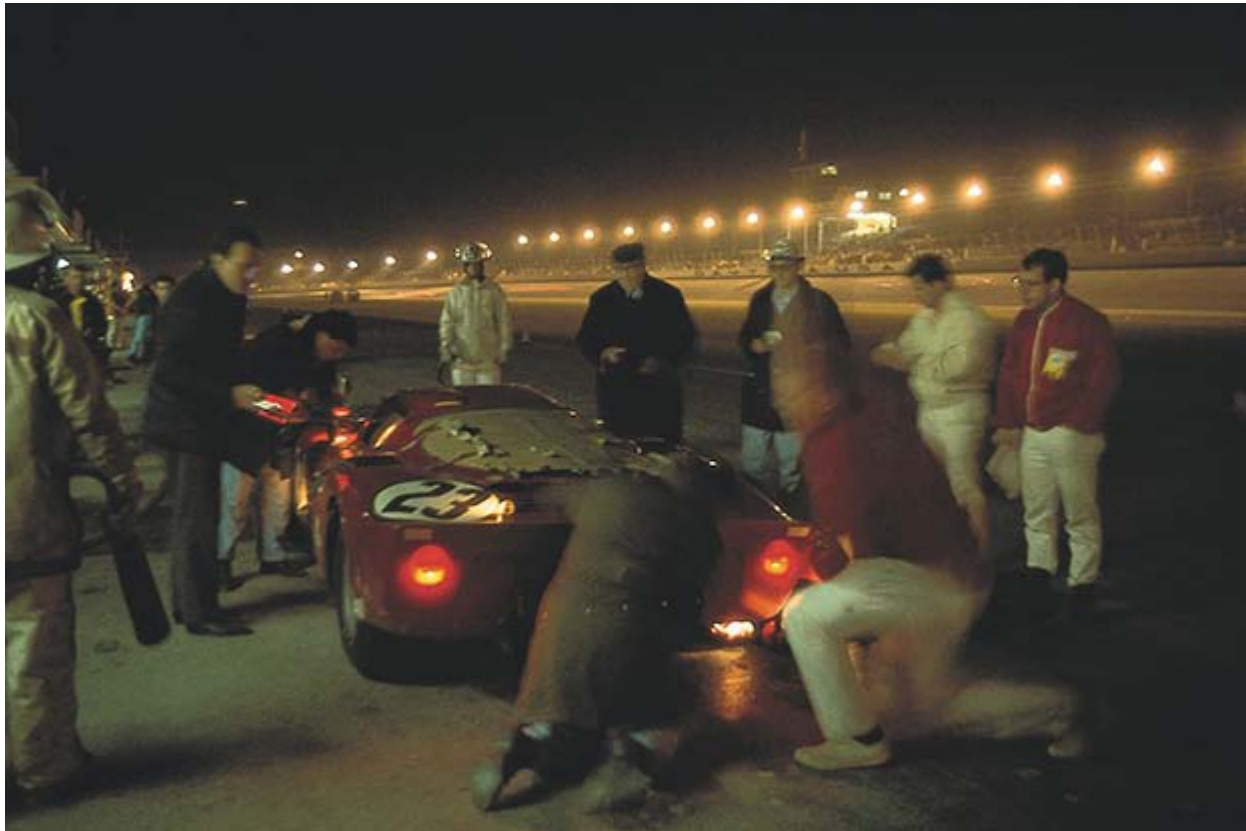
By Gordon Kirby

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Mario Andretti was less lucky in the Daytona 24 Hours than he was at Sebring where he won three times in 1967, '70 and '72. Andretti started eight long-distance races at Daytona but never won over 24 hours, scoring his only win in 1972 with Jacky Ickx aboard a Ferrari 312PB when the race was shortened, in the FIA's wisdom, to just six hours.

Mario was twice on the pole at Daytona, in 1970 aboard a Ferrari 512S, and in 1984 driving the prototype Porsche 962. He also finished the 24 Hours third in 1970 with Ickx and Arturo Merzario, fourth in '66 with Pedro Rodriguez in a Ferrari 365P2, fifth in '91 driving a Dauer Porsche 962 with sons Michael and Jeff, and sixth in '68 with Lucien Bianchi in an Alfa Romeo T33.



In 1972 the race was shortened to six hours by an FIA edict aimed at reducing all long-distance races, save Le Mans, to either six hours or 1000km in duration. Ferrari produced a new 312PB sports car that was lower and lighter than the previous year's car and Andretti qualified on the pole, but his car lapsed onto eleven cylinders in the early going and Ickx and he began to fade.

Numerous problems afflicted the other frontrunners however, and Mario and Ickx came through to win, taking the lead from teammates Tim Schenken and Ronnie Peterson with just fifteen minutes to go when Schenken had to pit to replace a punctured tyre.

“We dropped a cylinder at the start,” Mario recalls. “An injector went afoul. They tried to fix it, but we ran the whole way. We were running third, fourth, or fifth, and toward the end they were coming back to us. We were running second to Peterson and Schenken but they lost fourth gear, then cut a tyre near the end, and I passed them and won.”

At Sebring the following month Andretti once again put his Ferrari 312PB on the pole and led the opening laps only to run into a series of problems. Mario and Ickx lost time, first with a cut tyre, then a broken battery cable and finally an oil leak, but were able to come back in style, beating teammates Schenken and Peterson once again. It was Mario's third win at Sebring in six years.



“I really enjoyed those races with Ickx,” Mario says. “Jacky was one of the best teammates I ever had. He would let me qualify, which I loved to do, and physically, we were about the same size. His arms were longer than mine. I used to set up the car to suit me, and he would never change a thing.”

Mario and Ickx won again at the Brands Hatch 1000Kms in April with Peterson and Schenken finishing second again, making it four 1-2s in a row for Ferrari's sports car team.

Andretti didn't return to the Daytona 24 Hours for twelve years. In 1984 he teamed up with his son Michael, who was only twenty-one at the time, to race Porsche's first 962 which was based on the 956 but designed to

IMSA specs with more protection for the drivers' feet. Mario put the car on the pole and Michael and he led the race until the gearbox roasted itself.

"The 962 was a single turbo for IMSA in the States," Mario recounts. "That was a hell of a car. It was born correctly. The first engine was still the air-cooled six-cylinder and to qualify we closed the air intake underneath the car. People didn't realise how much quicker you could go in qualifying trim with it plugged-up. That's what prompted Porsche to go to a water-cooled engine because they realised they were losing so much downforce."

The turbo in the prototype 962 was located right on top of the gearbox and wasn't shielded anywhere near enough. "We cooked the damn synchronisers," Mario laments. "They unfairly blamed Michael because it was during one of his stints. They said he was too rough on the gearbox, too young and inexperienced. Michael was flying. He was as quick as anyone, quicker in fact."



Mario and Michael next ran the Daytona 24 Hours in 1989, sharing a 962 owned by Al Holbert who had been killed in an airplane crash the previous autumn. The car was prepared by Holbert's former crew chief Kevin Doran and run by Jim Busby's team but about a third of the way into the race the Porsche's brakes failed.

Andretti's final Daytona 24 Hours came two years later, sharing a rebodied Porsche 962C, run by Jochen Dauer, with Michael and younger son Jeff. A second Dauer Porsche was entered for the Unser family but the team wasn't up to fielding two cars for such high profile competitors. The Unsers' car dropped out in the middle of the night while Mario and Michael recovered from losing 20 laps because of some early electrical problems

to take the lead early on Sunday morning before the gearbox broke. They went far enough however to be classified fifth, 56 laps behind the winning Joest 962.

“That was disappointing because we drove so hard through the night,” Mario recalls. “It was great to share the car with Michael and Jeff. Jeff did a great job, running just as fast as Michael and me, and we were on our way to pulling off a great comeback win. But it wasn’t to be.”

So goes the grind of long-distance racing, particularly at Daytona where the infield section is rough and bumpy while the banking puts plenty of loads through the chassis and drivetrain. Nor does it help that more than half the race is run in the dark. It’s as tough as they come.

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