

Indy 500 winner Mario Andretti's home reflects his legendary career

Even at 73, with racing long behind him, 1969 Indy 500 winner shows no sign of slowing down

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Mario Andretti's home is his own personal museum: Racing legend Mario Andretti talks about his career in motorsports at his home in Nazareth, PA. (Robert Scheer/The Star)

BUSHKILL TOWNSHIP, PA. —

As Mario Andretti shows off his home's trophy-filled entry, an admission pops out.

"It represents work," he said.

Work is what Andretti, now 73, has always done best, from driving exotic race cars to hosting elaborate winery events to entertaining corporate guests at lavish dinners.

He'll spend Saturday at Indianapolis Motor Speedway like he has spent so many in recent years, working to make a race team better. He doesn't own Andretti Autosport —

his son, Michael, does. But Mario also contributes in a variety of ways to help the program succeed.

He almost can't help himself.

"He's a tinkerer," Michael said. "He's always doing something; he will never sit still for two minutes. There's always some kind of work, some project that he's into.

"I think he looks for jobs."

The perpetual motion side of Andretti comes from his father, Gigi, who as a young man ran seven farms, a small hotel and a restaurant on the peninsula known then as Istria (now part of Croatia). Gigi led a wife and three young children out of what became Communist-controlled Yugoslavia in the 1940s, endured seven years at an Italian refugee camp and established the family foothold in these rolling hills an hour north of Philadelphia.

Gigi's influence is all over Andretti's Tuscan-style home, which Andretti sees when he slows down.

Andretti can't remember the last time he took an actual vacation. He seldom accompanies his wife, Dee Ann, on her two-month spring pilgrimage to their Clearwater Beach, Fla., condominium.

Andretti estimates he works 340 days a year, although the person who knows best, his assistant of nearly 27 years, challenges that.

Amy Hollowbush organizes Andretti's calendar as quickly as he approves requests: Speaking engagements, media appearances, autograph sessions, all in the name of promoting something for someone somewhere. As May began, there were 26 major assignments leading up to the Indianapolis 500, including driving the Indy Racing Experience's two-seater that will lead the 33 starters around Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Hollowbush's job never stops because Andretti never stops.

"Three hundred and sixty-four days a year," she said of his days on the job. "He probably even found a minute to do something on Christmas Day."

No pit stops here

Mario Andretti is having a busy month, with more than two dozen major assignments before the race, including:

- Home visits from the Wall Street Journal, ESPN, Canada's TSN, Haute Living Magazine and Automobile Magazine.
- Radio talk shows from Arkansas to Fresno, Calif., and nine more in between (plus a variety of short telephone interviews).
- Attending the National Restaurant Show in Chicago.
- Riding on the Firestone/DreamWorks "Turbo" movie float in a parade.
- Attending Mutual of Omaha and Bridgestone/Firestone dinners.
- Judging a vintage/classic car show.
- Driving the Indy Racing Experience two-seater for eight days at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.
- Being interviewed by a fourth grade student writing a report about successful immigrants.
- Attending an event at the Larue D. Carter Memorial Hospital.
- Making an appearance at a store that has sold Firestone tires for 50 years.
- Attending five VIP customer receptions.
- Working with Mattel Hot Wheels on its "World's Best Driver" premiere.
- Attending a dinner at a restaurant that pours 300 to 400 cases of Andretti wine annually.
- Attending a reception for a new program affiliated with Purdue University.
- Finding time to get a haircut.

Source: Andretti PR

Andretti's modest home office is accessed via a pair of curved staircases off the living room. He slips away often, returning almost every call or email. He's also active on Twitter and has 62,000-plus followers.

Whether it's Firestone, GoDaddy, MagnaFlow, Hot Wheels, the Circuit of the Americas or Andretti Winery — just a few of the companies he works with — Andretti is the standard by which corporate representation is measured because he invests himself in the work.

Al Speyer, executive director of Bridgestone/Firestone Motorsports, once accompanied Andretti to a tire store in rural Louisiana. It was Andretti's first visit there, but he was introduced to a customer with whom he had spent time at another store more than a decade earlier.

"Mario said, 'I remember you,' and he did," Speyer said. "The great thing about him is that he really takes his time with people and gives that personal attention, whether that's a top executive or a customer.

"He makes people feel (appreciated); a little thing that has a big impact."

Andretti is constantly moving at home, too. Thirty-five years of racing affords him the ability to pay any laborer, but he knows how to do most odd jobs, so he does them himself. Follow him around and he likes to make notes on things to do. He also wields a good wrench.

“I see all these old people who don’t have anything to do but eat, drink and sleep,” he said. “I will never say ‘retired’ because that’s such a finality that I don’t want to be part of my life.

“I’ll work until they throw me in a box.”

All in the family

At home, one of Andretti’s jobs is to walk his daughter’s small dog, Max.



Family pet Max

Their journey along the rolling hills overlooking the Lehigh Valley is quick and precise, generally during the same part of the afternoon. The path leads around the neighbor’s home. He draws an audience.

“I tap on the glass,” the neighbor said, smiling. “That makes him walk even faster.”

Andretti’s 26-year-old grandson, Marco, is that neighbor, having purchased the sprawling home his parents built in 1986. Because racing and home life are intertwined, Marco gets to see the effort his grandfather puts into life.

“He goes in town to Hana Sushi every Tuesday night because they serve his wine,” Marco said. “He supports them because they support him.”

Andretti’s father learned the value of work by having it taken away. Both of his parents died young, and all of the family businesses were seized by the Nazis during World War II. That’s what led him to emigrate to nearby Italy with wife Rina, daughter Anna Marie and twin sons Mario and Aldo.

The Andrettis landed in a camp in Udine, an Italian border town, where they were separated by gender and were later transferred to the refugee camp in Lucca. Their living quarters consisted of a large room with no running water. Blankets separated families.

They endured seven years there. If anything good came out of the experience, it was this: The twins got jobs parking cars, and their passion for auto racing was born watching the sport of Italians.

Home in Pennsylvania

How the family got to Nazareth, Pa., is a testament to their father’s determination.

With everyone in the Lucca camp trying to transfer somewhere —*anywhere*— Gigi had a relative who had emigrated to the U.S., landing a job in a West Virginia coal mine before settling in Nazareth. Gigi applied the paperwork to follow.

It took three years and considerable patience, but approval from the American Consulate finally came in 1955. The Andrettis boarded an Italian ocean liner bound for New York with \$125, few possessions and no English in their vocabulary. The plan was to stay five years.

The twins, then 15, thought their dream of becoming racers was gone. Nazareth, though, had a dirt track, and since they didn’t have the money to buy a car, they built one out of a 1948 Hudson Hornet. The boys took turns racing it. Aldo raced until enduring a horrible sprint car crash in 1969; Mario’s career was one for the ages.

The Andrettis' first U.S. home was a small rental on Nazareth's Whitfield Street, followed by the purchase of a house at 147 Market St. Both houses remain, and tracing the family's history is a must when visiting the area.

After marrying Dee Ann in 1961, Mario started his own family. Occupying half of a duplex his family owned at 303 S. Green St., the family soon included sons Michael and Jeff, who were born there. Later the Andrettis built their own home a few blocks north of his parents on Market Street. That house was completed in 1968, the year before Mario won the Indy 500. Soon thereafter the town renamed the street "Victory Lane."

That house at 53 Victory Lane is for sale, with Andretti's daughter, Barbra, the listing agent. The asking price is \$520,000, a far cry from the Italian refugee camp.

Home reveals owner's passion

Today, the Andrettis live in a 22,000-square-foot home on Rose Inn Avenue. Construction started in 1995. They moved in three years later.

The long room that serves as the entry is lined with glass trophy cases featuring Andretti's most prized racing prizes, including his 1978 Formula One championship memorabilia. Italian pieces and murals accent the room.

The living room feeds to the family room, where the Andrettis watch racing. It overlooks a swimming pool with views of the old Nazareth Speedway where Dan Wheldon won the third of his IndyCar races in 2004. The track closed that fall, something that saddens Andretti every time he thinks about it. Andretti won there in '69.

The downstairs portion of the home has a game room, complete with a large bar, a billiards table and plush seating around the trophy car owner Andy Granatelli had made for Andretti after they won the '69 500. At the time the trophy matched Andretti in height and weight, although he jokes about the latter not being so similar today.

Behind the billiards table is an oversized wooden door carved by Michael's first father-in-law. The likeness on it is of Mario's father; the room behind a wine cellar, equipped to hold 5,500 bottles.

"The best all of Italy has to offer," Andretti said.

A variety of European regions are represented. He calls it “a decent collection.”

The home is stately but not eccentric. In the roadside barn, Andretti proudly points out a tractor he received years ago. He says he uses it.

Andretti has a few cars to show off, including the last Indy car he raced, but it’s a modest collection for a champion of his stature. It’s the basement full of racing treasures — trophies, artwork, rings — that reminds him of his passion.

“I went where the action was, from sports cars to dirt to Indy, then maybe off to Argentina for Formula One,” he said. “Variety is what I really loved the most, and it’s what kept me stimulated.”

Animal lover

Andretti doesn’t need a calendar to know he works a lot. He has a yellow-naped Amazon parrot to remind him.

Gonzo the parrot has been one of Andretti’s best friends for 25 years. The bird sits in the breakfast room off the kitchen, welcoming the racing legend each time he enters.

The length of Andretti’s trip can be measured in the bird’s sound.

“Hiiiiiiiiiii,” Gonzo says in longer calls when Andretti has been gone longer than usual.



Mario and Gonzo

Andretti loves that bird the way he loved his potbelly pig that died in 2007. Martini's cage was in the breakfast nook, and a photo of him remains the wallpaper on Andretti's smart phone. He refuses to change it.

"We were together 17 years, 10 months," Andretti said.

"It's weird," Michael said, "but that's him. He loves those animals."

At one point Andretti had the pig, the parrot and a Great Dane named Bosco.

The best part of being home, Andretti said, is sharing time with his family. Marco's home is a revolving door of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. Marissa, who graduates Saturday from Cabrini College outside in Philadelphia, and Lucca, 13, still frequently stay in their childhood rooms near Marco's master suite.

While Michael lives in Indianapolis, his siblings, Jeff and Barbra, live in the Lehigh Valley, and they're in and out of their parents' home often.

Mario and Marco often play tennis or golf. Sometimes Marco comes to his grandparents' house for dinner, but usually it's the other way around.

"They like to come here," Marco said. "Probably the reason is that I've always got friends around, so it's easier for them to join us rather than all of us join them, but honestly I think it's because they have more fun here.

<http://www.indystar.com/article/20130517/SPORTS0107/305170054/Life-home-Indy-500-legend-Mario-Andretti>