

RETRO: Mario Andretti, World Champion - Part 1, The Foundations of Glory

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Tomorrow marks the 35th anniversary of Mario Andretti becoming Formula 1 World Champion, America's last. David Malsher looks at the build-up to that title-winning year.



It's not only in hindsight that this story amazes, as it goes from hopeless beginnings to title glory in under three years; it was genuinely amazing to chart at the time. And it owes at least as much to the determination, self-belief and vision of Mario Gabriele Andretti as it does to the technical genius and drive to succeed of Lotus founder Anthony Colin Bruce Chapman.

From 1968, when he entered two races for Lotus (setting pole position in the second!) through to the end of 1972, Andretti had entered just 21 World Championship grands prix, winning the '71 South African GP for Ferrari, his first F1 race for *Il Cavallino Rampante*. His big contracts were still in USAC, but having achieved three Indy car titles and the '69 Indy 500, Andretti then went through a relatively barren period with the so-called “superteam” of Vel's Parnelli Jones from '72-'74. The cars were sometimes quick, frequently unreliable, and a victory at Trenton in April '73 was the sole highlight. The bank statements looked considerably healthier than the results sheets, and for someone with a racer's soul like Mario, that wasn't enough.

And so he persuaded Jones and team co-owner Vel Miletich to enter Formula 1 in 1975. The Maurice Phillippe-penned VPJ4 was reasonably quick at times, as it owed much in shape and concept to the Lotus 72 that Phillippe had a considerable hand in designing years earlier. But in the intervening period, the game had moved on considerably, and consequently, the Ferraris and McLarens were out of reach at most races. Certainly, the results weren't coming swiftly enough for Parnelli to retain his primary sponsor, Viceroy cigarettes. Thus the '63 Indy 500 winner entered '76 in a financial quandary, determined not to squander his own money on what, so far, had proved a mid-grid project. Just as in his driving days, Mr. Jones was not prepared to be in any racing category just to make up the numbers....



And so VPJ went MIA in Brazil, while Andretti, never one to sit on his thumbs, took up an offer to drive for Lotus as a one-off. Now, Lotus too, had been in the doldrums of late. The magnificent Lotus 72, which had won the drivers' title for Jochen Rindt in 1970 and Emerson Fittipaldi in '72, and won the Constructors' Championship in '70, '72 and '73, had required the in-cockpit acrobatics of Ronnie Peterson to win three races in '74. A year later, it virtually needed a walker to get to the grid, but with its supposed replacement, the Lotus 76, having proved a disaster, the six-year-old design would have to do. In 1975, Peterson ended up scoring precisely one more point than Andretti, 6-5.

That “one-off” race at Brazil in '76 was an inauspicious false start for an Andretti-Peterson-Lotus partnership that would bear such fruit two years later. Ronnie managed to run into his teammate in the early laps, sending both of the new Lotus 77s into retirement, whereupon the disenchanted Swede up and left for the March team, while Andretti returned to Parnelli for rounds two and three. On the grid at Long Beach, however, he discovered that would be the last F1 race for VPJ. Angry, disappointed but not altogether surprised, Mario was in a miserable mood the next morning, when he wound up having breakfast in the same room, and then at the same table, as Chapman.

At the age of 36, Andretti had no time to lose in F1 terms. In fact, he knew it was pretty much now or never. While he loved Indy car racing and loved sprint cars, too, it was Alberto Ascari racing at Monza in the early 1950s that had sparked his love of racing, and Formula 1 was an itch he just hadn't been able to scratch. Chapman, meanwhile, had to get his sponsors back to Victory Lane and was as hungry as ever to make the next big technical leap. Peterson had been a hopeless test driver, and his replacement Gunnar Nilsson was an unknown quantity in that area. What Lotus needed was a technically savvy but also fast and determined driver who was in F1 for all the right reasons; someone who could take whatever Chapman and his designers came up with and hone it and refine it into a winner.

A deal was done. Finally, more than a decade after Jimmy Clark had let Chapman know how highly he rated this Andretti guy, the super-rookie at Indy in '65 when Jimmy won, team owner and driver had finally got their act together. It would prove to be a meeting of minds.

The Lotus 77 of 1976 was called the “fully adjustable” car, which theoretically could be tailored perfectly for every type of track on the Formula 1 schedule. But initially it seemed mediocre (at best) on all of them, and certainly still no match for a Ferrari or McLaren. A podium finish for Nilsson in Spain was encouraging, a front-row start for Andretti in Sweden was rather more than that, but then the engine blew at half-distance. However, at both Zandvoort and Mosport, Mario started in the top six and finished third.



By the time the teams arrived at Mount Fuji for the season finale, all the racing world seemed interested in was the battle between the Niki Lauda and James Hunt, and that's understandable. But it did mean that Andretti's pole position and then brilliant and intelligent drive to victory in the rain were somewhat overshadowed, and remain so to this day. Remarkably, Andretti's second grand prix victory had come more than five and a half years after his first, but now it opened the floodgates.



The Lotus 78, used by Lotus throughout the 1977 season, was the first F1 car to harness ground effect, and Mario's staggering ability to exploit its benefits, and make up for the fact that it was slow in a straight line, took him to four victories and seven pole positions. In truth, it should have

resulted in the World Championship, too. Yes, there was a slice of luck in two of Andretti's wins – Jody Scheckter suffered a puncture while leading in the closing stages at Long Beach (ABOVE), allowing Mario and Lauda to slip through, while John Watson's engine coughed low on fuel on the last lap at Dijon, so that the closely following Lotus thrust past. But the six points gained by good fortune at those two races (F1 points in those days went 9-6-4-3-2-1 to the top six finishers) were more than negated by the eight lost while dominating in Sweden; a faulty fuel-metering unit caused the engine to run too rich, and a necessary last-minute splash-and-dash dropped Mario from first to sixth. The driver was almost speechless with frustration afterward. It still riles him to this day, in fact.

Mario, it must be said, was not error-free that year. His first-lap collision with Watson at Zolder looked very expensive when you note that his less-talented teammate, Nilsson, won easily; and there was another missed chance when Andretti tried to make up too many places time on lap 1 at Fuji, after a slow getaway from pole, but his mistakes were greatly outnumbered by his reliability issues. Austria, Holland and Canada saw certain wins lost to blown Cosworths, and the same affliction robbed Lotus No. 5 of fourth at Silverstone and fifth in Germany.

An ignition failure while holding third in Brazil also added to his woes. That was a cluster of 36 points lost right there, in just six grands prix...and Andretti lost the title to Lauda by 25.



Development Cosworths may have added up to 10 horsepower – and, the Lotus 78 needed that, given its poor straightline speed – but in terms of results, those Cossies cost way more than they added. Henceforth, Mario decided to drive to a self-imposed rev limit the following year, some 600rpm lower than the one suggested by the engine manufacturer. Surely all he needed was an improved finishing rate; he already knew that Lotus had something special planned for the following year, a car that improved on the qualities of the 78, but addressed its issues.

What Mario hadn't counted on for 1978 was the return of Peterson to replace Nilsson at Lotus, and it's no secret the American wasn't impressed at the thought of two number one drivers robbing points off each other, even if they had a car advantage. Lauda had proven the value of consistency and reliability in 1977, and won the season-long war against the often faster combos of Andretti/Lotus, Hunt/McLaren and Scheckter/Wolf. If next year turned into a close fight again, was Andretti to have his results further diluted by having a quick teammate sometimes finishing ahead of him? After all his hard work to try and drag Lotus to the summit once more, to miss out on the view from the top would tick him off royally.



Mario felt he had cause to worry because he knew the potential pace of Peterson, with whom he'd been part-time teammate in Ferrari sports cars back in 1972. Although Ronnie was currently looking unfit and had been driving bored over the past three seasons – his final one with the venerable Lotus 72, his year back at underfunded March and then a year trying to figure out the Tyrrell P34 – few doubted he'd still got it. A fired up SuperSwede was still regarded as F1's fastest guy over a qualifying lap. Maybe Hunt could match him when he was angry, or Carlos Reutemann when he was happy, but Peterson just needed to be bothered...and a Lotus team in the ascendancy was likely to encourage him to dig deep into his natural talent once more.

Yet Andretti certainly didn't need to doubt himself. Although turning 38 in February of '78, he was only in his third full season of Formula 1 so had never had a chance to go stale. His hunger to emulate his first hero, Ascari, drove him on, session after session and race after race. There

aren't many drivers of whom you can confidently say they put as much effort into their driving irrespective of whether they were in a one-car or two-car team, irrespective of whether they were partnered with a champ or a chump, but Andretti was one of them. When he stepped out of a car, you knew he'd given his all.

So if he had indeed plateaued qualifying pace-wise, that plateau was high, very high, up there with Scheckter and Lauda, while in terms of race pace, Mario was in the very top strata. Where he stood alone was race day combativeness: in today's terms, think Fernando Alonso-style aggression combined with a Lewis Hamilton-like sense of opportunism. Andretti's efforts to hit the front ASAP sometimes turned "Oh crap!", but more often than not, his determination to be racing while the others were "settling in" paid off. (The new hotshot replacing Lauda at Ferrari, Gilles Villeneuve, would follow this same policy.)

What Mario also had in his favor was an ability to set the car up so that it did the work. This, of course, he'd learned through all his seasons in Indy car racing as well as his sports car experience, but it had been rare in F1 since Jackie Stewart had retired. Aside from Andretti, only Lauda was known for great technical understanding. These two knew "how to sort a car," an increasingly vital quality for racecar drivers as racecars became increasingly sophisticated. And, as we were to discover, the Lotus 79 was the most sophisticated of the lot.

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