

Andretti: F1's classic '76 season was one to remember

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Not to give away the ending to Ron Howard's upcoming Formula One film, "Rush," but the winner of the climactic F1 race in 1976 was neither British playboy James Hunt nor icy Austrian Niki Lauda. It was Mario Andretti who captured that year's Japanese Grand Prix in weather conditions so adverse they won't need any Hollywood embellishment.

"In all my days, I never, ever encountered anything like that. It was a deluge," Andretti recalled. "We were begging the organizers if they could delay it. They totally ignored our safety."

Andretti, who won Formula One's world championship in 1978, is one of America's greatest and most versatile race drivers. He won a slew of titles on U.S. soil, including the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500 and four IndyCar championships.

Andretti, 73, is now the official goodwill ambassador for Circuit of the Americas, which will host its second F1 Grand Prix in November. Recently, he chatted with the American-Statesman via telephone about Formula One in the 1970s, particularly about 1976, arguably the most dramatic year in the sport's history.

While the 1976 season was defined by the clashes between Hunt and Lauda, Andretti had some battles of his own.

"You had to earn your stripes a little bit," Andretti said. "The perception was that an American couldn't cut it. We're oval racers. ... An American cannot drive in the rain."

One of the biggest challenges of F1 in the 1970s, however, was merely surviving. The sport and the tracks were far more dangerous back then. The norm was for about one F1 driver a year to die in a race, qualifying or practice.

"Open wheel cars, we were losing guys. The stock cars had better safety, roll bars and everything," Andretti said. "That was the way it was. The danger aspect was accepted."

Drivers of those times, particularly Hunt, are romanticized as being real characters and real men compared with today's more corporate types. But Andretti doesn't see it that way.

"What I saw over the decades is that there are just some characters who stand out," he said. "But we were probably a little looser and with less responsibility to behave."

The classic picture of Hunt was snapped after he won the 1977 United States Grand Prix (now Austin's race). He was sitting on a McLaren with, presumably, a Marlboro cigarette in one hand, a Schlitz beer in the other and a Penthouse Pet by his side.

Would Hunt have to behave differently in today's more straight-laced F1 world?

"I don't know if it would have made a difference. He just didn't give a damn. He was just as loose as he could be," Andretti said.

Hunt's intensity, however, was there on the track.

"I had a few skirmishes with him," Andretti said. "There was one race in 1977 in Holland where we were fighting for the lead. I got alongside of him. I had him set up. He ran me right off the road."

A YouTube video of that Dutch Grand Prix shows Andretti hounding Hunt, usually taking the outside on corners. After a couple of blocks by Hunt, he did indeed force Andretti off the course, although it was Hunt's car that was knocked out of the race. Andretti's car weathered the crash but later suffered a blown engine. When both Hunt and Andretti were back at the paddock, they exchanged words.

"He blamed me," Andretti marveled.

That 1977 race was eventually won by Lauda. Andretti said, as have others, that Lauda was quite a contrast to Hunt.

Hunt "had a very natural talent. He was not technical," Andretti said. "He was really a charger."

Andretti said that Lauda was very technical and that his aggressiveness was calculated.

In 1976, Lauda appeared well on his way to winning the season's drivers' championship when a frightening accident at Nurburgring turned his car into a spinning fireball.

"I remember it clearly," Andretti said. "I was maybe two seconds behind him. We all spun not to hit him. ... It was a huge ball of fire. The track was blocked. We actually thought he was gone. He was smart enough to not breathe."

Lauda's face was burned and his lungs were damaged from the toxic gases he did inhale. But Lauda made one of the most incredible comebacks in any sport and returned to the grid about six weeks after the frightening accident.

"It was something that took an incredible amount of courage. We were all in awe of that," Andretti said.

The Hunt-Lauda battle for the title came down to the final race in Japan, not far from Mount Fuji. It was a race the world wanted to watch, as the chase intrigued even those who weren't F1 fans. But the weather on race day was abysmal.

"Today, reason would prevail. Let's wait half an hour," Andretti said. "We can run in the rain, but this was an extraordinary circumstance."

According to Andretti, visibility at the start of the race was about 20 percent. On the lower parts of the course there were rivers of water washing across the track.

"It almost took the steering wheel out of your hand. You had to charge through it," Andretti said.

Starting on the pole, and then staying near the front, Andretti had better visibility than some other drivers in the pack who squinted through the roostertails of spray kicked up by the cars.

Eventually, the weather broke and the track partially dried. Andretti decided to try to extend the life of his tires, and avoid a pit stop, by running through some of the wet spots to cool the tires. The ploy worked, just barely.

"My tires were totally knackered," Andretti said. "Probably in another one or two laps I would have lost the tires. There was a danger my left front would blow out.

The win — in the worst of rains by an American driver — was Andretti's first of what remains perhaps F1's most memorable season. Two years later, he won the drivers' championship, and he remains the last American to do so.

"It became the best (racing) family I ever had," Andretti said. "It's a part of my life that was very precious."

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