

MOTORSPORTS

Mario Andretti to be honoured by Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Driver Marco Andretti (R) and his grandfather Mario Andretti talk in the pit lane on the last day of practice before the Indianapolis 500 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2008. (BRENT SMITH/Reuters)

Mario Andretti always loved racing in Canada, even though his most vivid memory is a disappointing one.

It happened in the 1977 Canadian Grand Prix at the old Mosport International Circuit, now Canadian Tire Motorsport Park. Andretti started from pole after putting up the fastest time ever in a Formula One car on the circuit, qualifying 0.557 seconds quicker than second placed man on the grid, defending world champion James Hunt.

In the race, he was on his way to glory when disaster struck.

“I was leading by a lap with five laps to go and my oil pressure started fluctuating,” he said.

“I slowed down, slowed down, and slowed down, I let [Walter Wolf Racing driver and eventual race winner] Jody Scheckter unlap himself and I was just cruising and coming down the

straightaway – you know my straightaway – and just toward the end the engine just scattered all over the place and I was classified sixth. That race definitely stands out.”

The back straight at the old Mosport was named the Mario Andretti Straightaway after he hit dizzying speeds on the long stretch in an IndyCar during a U.S Auto Club (USAC) race in the late 1960s.

Although many might remember Andretti for his days in F1 and IndyCar, his first race in Canada was in a midget car in the early 1960s. He went on to drive just about every other kind of series out there, including Can-Am, Formula One, Formula 5000, IndyCars, and stock cars, on tracks at both ends of the country.

His history of racing in Canada and his success in almost category going make the 73-year-old racing legend a popular choice as the 2012 International Category inductee into the Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony takes place at a sold out Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto on Sept. 28.

In addition to Andretti, five Canadians will be honoured at the 19th Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame’s Induction Ceremony: driver and track official Bob Armstrong, who died in April after battling cancer, World of Outlaws racer Jimmy Carr, driver and co-owner of Canadian Tire Motorsport Park Ron Fellows, stock car racer Tom Walters, and track owners Jon and Sharon Fletcher.

Arguably the most accomplished racer to ever drive in Canada, it’s a bit surprising to some that the only driver to win the Daytona 500, the Indianapolis 500, and a Formula One world championship was not selected earlier. For his part, Andretti is simply humbled by being selected.

“All I can say is that I am totally flattered about it,” said Andretti, who is also a four-time IndyCar champion.

“Honestly you take nothing for granted and it gives you pause. You look back on your career and you are thankful for so many things. Recognition like this is something you never expect especially in the sense that you win a race or you finish second and you get a trophy and you expect that. This is discretionary – I am sure you are considered with other nominees and then if they happen to choose you it is flattering to the ultimate degree and I take it that way.”

His only F1 title came 35 years ago this week later under difficult circumstances. Although a sixth place finish in the 1978 Italian Grand Prix on Sept. 10 locked up the world championship for Andretti, he was in no mood to never celebrate his success.

The race featured a spirited battle at the front between Andretti’s Lotus and Canadian superstar Gilles Villeneuve, whose Ferrari held off his rival until the final few laps. Although he crossed the finish line first in Monza, a one-minute penalty to both Andretti and Villeneuve for a jump start put them back to sixth and seventh respectively.

The single point was enough to secure the championship because Andretti’s teammate and good friend Ronnie Peterson got caught up in an 11-car, first-lap accident and died the next day in

hospital due to complications following surgery to repair his broken legs. At the time of his death, Peterson was the only driver with a mathematical chance at beating Andretti to the 1978 title.

Andretti won several races USAC races at Mont Tremblant in the late 1960s and an F5000 event at Mosport in 1975, but he never tasted victory in F1 or IndyCar. A podium was the best he could do in F1, taking third in 1976.

His best finish in Canada in an IndyCar was a second in the Toronto race in 1991, losing to his son Michael.

“I have has some great times in Canada but to be on the podium with your son, I mean do things get any better than that?” said Andretti who is looking forward to mingling with Canadian racing fans at the ceremony.

“I also have a special appreciation for Canadian fans – they are very educated and they really know they know their motorsport. Every time that we were there, we always felt very welcome.”

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