

Formula 1 Legends: Interview with Mario Andretti

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Andretti's 1976 Lotus takes part in a classic race in support of the 2014 Canadian Grand Prix

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by Elle Haus

Italian-born, American-raised Mario Andretti's motorsport dream began at the 1954 Formula 1 Italian Grand Prix at Monza. The 14-year-old Andretti, along with his twin brother, watched in amazement as the Ferrari of his first racing idol and hometown hero Alberto Ascari sped around the track, not knowing then that this cherished childhood moment would also be career defining for him.

Monza holds a special place in Andretti's heart and he declares he could not have written a better script: in 1978 he secured the Formula 1 World Championship there, twenty-four years after attending his first race. That fateful weekend in 1954 set in motion a series of events which would ultimately lead to an outstanding career spanning five decades, 879 races and 111 wins across various classes of motorsport. Elle Haus sat down with the racing icon to discuss his remarkable career, his thoughts on Formula 1 today, taking a trip down memory lane back to where it all began.

Elle Haus: Let's start with Monza, and what it meant to you as a 14-year-old seeing your first big race there.

Mario Andretti: Well Monza. I could say that it was probably the true beginning of my dream to be a racing driver, and I could not have written a better script because this was in 1954 and in 1978 that's where I clinched the [Formula 1] World Championship. To me it was amazing of course winning the race, I won the race the year before. I won that year [1978] too but I was penalised along with Gilles Villeneuve for allegedly jumping the start which I think was debatable, I just reacted to Gilles that he took off; I reacted and I stopped and I went. But anyway that's another story. And the reason I didn't protest was because my teammate Ronnie Petersen was killed that day, so I didn't have the energy to go and continue a protest. But just to repeat what I said about how important that particular day was or that weekend in 1954 at age 14, that's what started it all. Not only just for myself, but I also have a twin brother [Aldo] and we both had the same dream and that's what we pursued.

EH: And then a year later your family moved to Nazareth and you and Aldo discovered a race track nearby.

MA: We had no idea what to expect when we moved to the States but we soon found out, three days after arriving here, that there was a race track nearby. We had no idea about oval racing, you know the American type racing, but the sound was good and it looked like a lot of action and at the same time to me it looked very doable at that level. As you can imagine when we saw Monza, the Grand Prix cars [of] Mercedes, Ferrari, Maserati all that seemed so far away, so unachievable, that when we saw these cars on a local level racing they looked real brute like. But again it looked doable, looked like something we could build. In fact



Mario and Aldo at the 2007 Indy 500

that's what we started, two years later at age 17, that's when we started building a racing car and we started driving two years later.

EH: How did you go with that car?

MA: We were winning actually. That was really a great launching pad for us because it was one car, two drivers. Obviously Aldo and I had to share but he started first, he won the toss and it's a matter of record, he won the very first race. The following weekend I did. But we won races. That year we crashed and did all of the good things that are normal for young racing drivers. That was a very auspicious start for us as you could imagine, and encouraged us along the way. We had a very good season except that at the end of that season, my brother was seriously injured in that car on the very last race of the season, which pretty much determined his career

at that point. He raced for ten more years but then he had another very big accident which actually retired him. But for me it was an early stepping stone to launch me to the next level and I continued on and was much more fortunate. I started my career in 1959 and my last race was Le Mans in 2000, so basically I had a 41 year career.

EH: In 1969 you won the Indianapolis 500, what did that win mean to you?

MA: Well it's one of the ambitious goals that you set for yourself, to win the classics. And if you're racing in America, the classic event which is known throughout the globe is the Indianapolis 500. I felt very comfortable from the beginning there, which was in 1965 and I was *Rookie of the Year*, I finished third and I continued on and I won the National Championship as well, and I was the youngest driver to do so at that point. And then to win it four years later was something that was huge for my career and opened so many doors. But two years earlier I won the Daytona 500 which is the big shining event for stock cars which is so very popular here. And two weeks after winning Daytona I won my first 12 Hours of Sebring with Bruce McLaren as my teammate, so my career was shaping up quite nicely. But as you can imagine to win the best known events around the world is the most important part, that's what really can be life changing which it was in so many ways for me.

EH: In 1991 in Milwaukee we saw the Andretti Podium, which must have been a really proud moment for you sharing that with your family.

MA: Yes it was indeed. And that's pride with a capital "P" actually, because as you can imagine having my own son Michael and my nephew John, Aldo's son, and myself on the same podium. Then later on Michael became my teammate actually. He and I shared the front row many times qualifying and also we've been on pole position I think 12 times together. And we were first and second like eight times in IndyCar. You can imagine how sweet that is for a family to be able to share those moments, you can never even technically plan for it, it's just going to happen or not. And I had so much satisfaction throughout the years from that standpoint to see the family continue. Both my sons are in racing and just like my brother, my second son Jeffrey was not as fortunate as his brother or myself. He had a devastating injury in 1992 in Indianapolis which almost cost him both his legs and that determined his career. But then something like this puts perspective on things, like how fortunate, how lucky Michael and I have been in the sport. And it's not a given, you know, because both my brother and my other son paid dearly for what they tried to do and we know how much we can appreciate the luck that we've had on our side throughout our careers.

EH: How do you handle the competitiveness and tensions that arise between teammates when that teammate is your son?

MA: Well the competitive juices were there. I wasn't about to give an inch to him or receive an inch. But the one that was really on pins and needles as you can imagine was my wife because she was on the sidelines watching us duke it out, and many times actually we were touching wheels and things. Not too hard, she wanted to be sure that we would look after one another and we were not doing anything stupid to put my son in danger or him put me in danger, but we were not giving anything. Actually the first pass, the first overtake that my son did to me competitively for the lead, we touched wheels all the way through the corner and it was very forceful. But at the end of the day there was a lot of satisfaction. When he went by I'm thinking "how dare you Michael!" and then as he's gone into the sunset I'm thinking "that's my boy". It's a double-edged sword. You know that we had the closest finish in IndyCar in 1986 at the Grand Prix in Portland.



EH: Yes, Father's Day. I bet your wife's heart was racing watching that one at the finish line.

MA: Yeah, indeed. Here's the thing though. He actually definitely deserved to win that because he had somewhat of a lead on me as we were coming down to the end of the race. It was about three laps to go and my engineer's shouting in my ears that Michael's having some fuel pick-up problems. At that point I had settled for second and I knew I couldn't catch him. And I really stood on my seat, and here he was coming closer and closer. The last lap we basically had a drag race onto the finish line and I just, just nipped him by an inch. And he was so upset. When we were on the podium then he realised it was Father's Day and he says, well Happy Father's Day Dad [*laughs*]. He probably thought I could give him a break and let him win, but no way!

EH: You have raced practically everything there is to race on four wheels, so of all the classes of motorsport you have competed in which is your favourite?

MA: It has to be Formula 1, mainly because that's where my love for the sport really began. And of course the opportunity to enter the sport came in America, so I had a very satisfying complete career here in the United States with IndyCar then stock cars and so forth. But if somebody would say you can only choose one discipline, then I would choose Formula 1. It's that simple.

EH: After three decades of racing in Formula 1 and now today as a spectator, how do you see the evolution of the sport?

MA: Well changes are expected, and they're subtle changes if you will. If you're in the sport as close as I am the changes are almost natural, they are not a big thing. The thing that allows me to understand things quite well is that I've gone through the decades and I've seen huge changes materialise, but it was gradual and it's the same thing now. The thing that I understand, that I'm quite happy about, is that I drove into the computer era which is now. We started computer instruments in the car [in IndyCar] back in the middle of the '80s, so I drove into the so-called computer modern era right through the mid '90s. And I'm staying on it, I'm still driving a two-seater car which is the same as a proper racing car only it's expanded for another passenger, but all the technology and everything is the same. So the fact that I'm up to date with things makes it easier to accept and understand.

I love progress and I love technology, and I like the way the sport is today. Obviously it's much more regulated because there's so much knowledge out there that you can make the cars undriveable, but there's a human element so it has to be regulated which is fair enough. In fact in the IndyCar we were achieving the speeds, the records that were set back in the mid 90s when I was still driving are still standing, they had to slow the cars down for the safety standpoint so as you can see I have driven faster than what they are doing today. I'm not antiquated by any means.

EH: Which is your favourite track that you've raced on?

MA: Any track that I won [*laughs*]. That's the only way I can answer that. The other question is, what's your favourite racing car? Every racing car that I won a race with. So it's as simple as that. I don't know how else to put it because it's a fact.

EH: And which of your 111 career wins is the most memorable?

MA: The most memorable would have to be probably winning Indianapolis because of what it really meant career wise. But from personal satisfaction it had to be winning the Grand Prix in Monza in 1977. In 1974 I won the Monza 1000 Kilometers for Alfa Romeo with Arturo Merzario which was really my first victory in Monza. But winning the race, the Grand Prix in '77, that was huge for me because of what Monza stood for as far as my life. I don't think I could have derived more satisfaction than that. I count my blessings every day. I think I won more races than I deserved and I am thankful for that every day so I take nothing for granted. My life in motor racing has been absolutely complete.

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