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Andretti's 1984 title

By [Gordon Kirby](#) on 13 October 2014



Thirty years ago, in the team's second year in business, [Mario Andretti](#) won Newman/Haas Racing's first of eight Indycar championships. Newman/Haas competed in Indycar racing for 29 years, establishing itself as second only to Penske Racing with a record of 107 wins, 110 poles and eight championships won by Mario and Michael Andretti, Nigel Mansell, Cristiano da Matta and Sébastien Bourdais.

Paul Newman and Carl Haas built their team around Mario Andretti. He was the team's *raison d'être* and only driver through the first six years. The team made its debut in 1983 with a hastily-designed Lola T700 that required a mammoth amount of work to turn into a reliable, competitive car with which Andretti was able to win two races that year.

But a much better car was required and an all-new Lola was commissioned for 1984. Nigel Bennett was hired to design the new car, the T800, with Mark Williams assisting and Eric Broadley designing the car's gearbox.

With the T800, Bennett pushed Lola into adopting modern carbon fibre composite technology. At the time, not enough was known about carbon fibre's ability to withstand high-speed impacts with a superspeedway's walls so the central part of the chassis retained a more traditional aluminium honeycomb 'bathtub'. This was bonded to a complete carbon composite top section and nose that made the chassis much stiffer than the T700.



Aerodynamically, the T800 was infinitely better than the T700 although by today's standards the wind tunnel work for the T800 was rudimentary. The T800's long tail for the Indianapolis and Michigan superspeedways was Broadley's work.

The new car worked well out of the box and the team completed two largely trouble-free tests before the '84 season opener at Long Beach. 1984 was the first time CART raced in the California streets, replacing [F1](#) which had run at Long Beach from 1976-83 following the inaugural F5000 race back in 1975. Andretti had run plenty of laps around the place in both F5000 and F1 cars, and of course he had famously won the 1977 United States GP in Long Beach aboard a JPS Lotus.

Mario put his experience to good use taking the pole by more than half a second. In the race, he was in a class of his own, leading all the way and winning by more than a minute. It was a perfect start to the season with a brand new car but at Phoenix two weeks later Andretti ran out of fuel on the way into the pits and then broke a driveshaft as he laid into the throttle on the way out.

Indianapolis followed and things looked good through the first week of practice as Andretti set the pace and became the first man to lap the venerable speedway at 210mph. He also recorded the quickest straightaway speeds, confirming the T800's aerodynamic efficiency. A few days later Mario went round at more than 212mph and was favoured to win the pole. But spark plug wire gremlins interfered when it counted on Pole Day and he qualified no better than sixth averaging just over 207mph. It was a bitter pill to swallow.



In the race Mario ran well, battling for the lead with Tom Sneva, Rick Mears and son Michael, who was making his rookie start in the 500. But then Mario's engine lost a cylinder courtesy of the same spark plug wire problem encountered in qualifying and eventually he collided with Josele Garza's car as the Mexican tried to enter the pits.

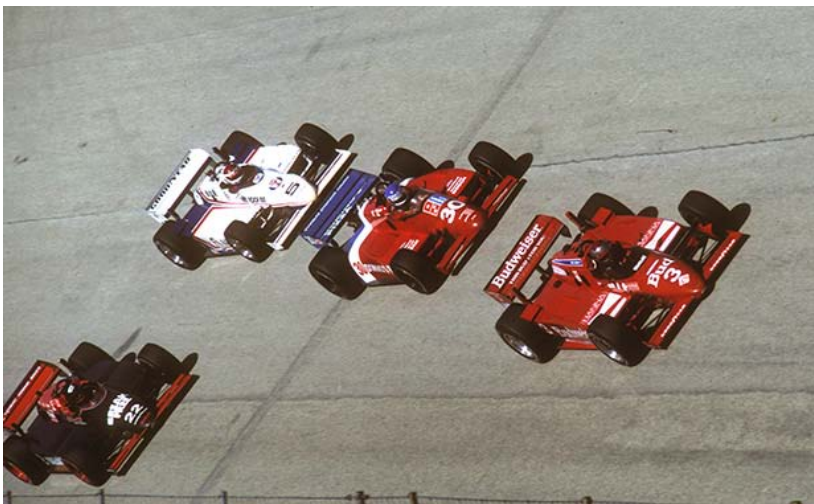
1984 Top 10

- 1 **Mario Andretti** Newman/Haas 176
- 2 **Tom Sneva** Mayer 163
- 3 **Bobby Rahal** Truesports 137
- 4 **Danny Sullivan** Shierson 110
- 5 **Rick Mears** Penske 110
- 6 **Al Unser Jr** Galles 103
- 7 **Michael Andretti** Kraco 102
- 8 **Geoff Brabham** Kraco 87
- 9 **Al Unser** Penske 76
- 10 **Danny Ongais** Interscope 53

At the Milwaukee Mile the week after the 500 Mario qualified third and was chasing pacesetters Sneva and Mears when his left rear wheel departed company with the car as he accelerated out of the pits from his final stop. He had to three-wheel around to the pits for another rear wheel, losing four laps.

“Some mistakes were made on the team’s part and some on my part during that season,” Mario remarks. “Of course, you’ll play to hell to find a season that goes without mistakes. But the guys really buckled down after that. Their recovery from that problem at Milwaukee was superb and, of course, they went on to win the pit crew award at the end of the season because the consistency was there. And that’s what a championship team shoots for.”

Andretti came back from the Milwaukee mishap to finish eighth while Sneva won the race from Mears. At that point Sneva was a clear championship leader with 58 points, 31 more than Mario who languished in fourth place behind Michael and Mears.



*Andretti leads Sullivan (30), Rahal (5) and Dick Simon (22) at Milwaukee.
Photo: Racemaker/Sproule*

At round five on the Portland road course Mario qualified on the pole and led the opening laps. But a stone holed a water radiator and he was out after only 13 laps. Andretti finally got his championship assault going two weeks later. He scored a superb win on a wet day on a 'road circuit' laid out in the parking lots of the Meadowlands in New Jersey, leading all the way from pole position when many others spun or crashed. Mario started the race on slick tyres while most others were on grooved wets and on a very slippery track he drove away from everyone. Suddenly Mario was up to second in points, just 16 behind Sneva.

At Cleveland's Burke Lakefront airport circuit the next weekend Mario again put the Newman/Haas Lola on the pole. He took the lead at the start and established himself at the front but on the way in for his first pitstop he ran out of fuel, losing the lead to Danny Sullivan before slithering off the pavement and skating across the grass while lapping another car. He recovered but just past half-distance the engine quit because of an ignition failure resulting in a DNF and zero points.

At the Michigan 500 near the end of July Andretti took his fifth pole of the year. He lapped the high-banked two-mile superspeedway at 211.088mph and again led the race's opening laps. But it quickly turned into a hard slog with a series of accidents. More than half that year's Michigan 500 was run under the yellow. Five cars were written off in accidents and four more were badly damaged.

In the middle of the long afternoon Mario ran into more plug wire problems and fell two laps behind. But the team wisely used the many yellows to repair their car and recover the lost laps. In the end, Andretti was able to lead the last twenty-six laps, holding off a relentless attack from Sneva who complained after the race that Mario had unfairly blocked him. But Sneva was never able to get alongside Andretti and finished a frustrated second with Mears third. Mario was delighted to score his first oval win of the year and his first 500-mile win in 15 years since winning the Indy 500 in 1969.



Photo: Racemaker/Hutson

Two weeks later Andretti took his sixth pole of the year at the team's home track, Elkhart Lake, and went on to score his fourth win of the year. Sneva blew an engine and didn't finish so for the first time since Long Beach four months earlier Mario took the championship lead by one point from Sneva with Mears another 11 points behind.

Next came the Pocono 500 where Andretti qualified on the front row and engaged in a fierce race with pole winner Mears, Sneva, Rahal and Sullivan. But more electrical gremlins brought Andretti into the pits. Eventually, after 400 miles, his engine failed.

But on Labor Day weekend at Mid-Ohio Andretti put himself back on top by scoring a superb win. A week and a half before the race at Mid-Ohio, Mario broke a pair of ribs when he crashed his power boat on his lake at Open Woods in northern Pennsylvania. He arrived for the race at one of America's most physically demanding tracks wearing an orthopaedic waistband but went out and took his seventh pole of the year, then proceeded to lead the race all the way, save for pitstops, eventually triumphing by more than half a minute from local hero Rahal. Sneva finished two laps down in seventh and Andretti moved back on top, five points ahead of Sneva and six clear of Mears.

"I got a lot out of myself at Mid-Ohio that year" Mario says. "From a stamina standpoint, with my cracked ribs on that track, it was a bear! Those are races you don't just forget. That was a race that mattered as far as personal satisfaction that year."



*Andretti with chief mechanic Darrell Sophe and engineer Tony Cicale.
Photo: Racemaker/Sroule*

Next came what turned out to be a key race of the season at the tiny 7/8th-mile Sanair tri-oval in Quebec's Eastern Townships. On the opening day of practice Mears made the biggest mistake of his career as he got uncharacteristically anxious in traffic, clipped another car and crashed heavily into the guardrail on the front straight. The accident smashed his feet and broke his legs and ankles.

Miraculously and by dint of huge personal effort, Rick would return to action the following year to forge a superb second phase of his remarkable career. But on that September day in 1984 Rick's championship hopes came to an abrupt and painful end.

There were plenty of other fast drivers capable of winning any race as the 225-lap blinder around the frantic Sanair proved. Bobby Rahal took his first pole of the year and led the first 100 laps chased hard by Sullivan, Mario, Michael, Al Unser Jr and Al Sr But early in the race Mario's car was hit by a spinning Ed Pimm and he had to stop at the pits for repairs, losing two laps.

Meanwhile Sullivan went on to win his third race of the year, beating Rahal and Michael. Mario made it home seventh while Sneva failed to finish, dropping out after 90 laps because of gearbox problems. So Andretti and Newman/Haas left Quebec with an 11-point lead over Sneva.



In the rain at Meadowlands.

Photo: Racemaker/Hutson

Two weeks later Andretti scored his sixth win of the year in a 100-lap, 200-mile sprint race at the high-banked Michigan Speedway that looked like a repeat of the track's July 500-mile race with Mario setting the pace and Sneva chasing hard. In fact, Andretti was lucky this time because his engine had lost its edge when Johnny Rutherford crashed with just four laps to go and the yellow flag came out. So the race finished under the yellow and Mario won at a canter from Sneva. He now led Sneva by 15 points, 142 to 127, with three races remaining.

In the 150-mile sprint race on the one-mile Phoenix oval in the middle of October Andretti again went to the front, setting the pace through the middle stages of the race. With 20 laps to go he was under pressure from a closely-pursuing Rahal with Sneva trailing some distance behind in third when he got over-anxious trying to lap Gordon Johncock's car around the outside in turn four. Instead, they collided.

Johncock slid into the wall and Mario limped to the pits for repairs to a broken nose and steering arm. Rahal went on to win the race from Al Jr, Michael and Sneva while Mario salvaged 12th place and one point from the day. Sneva's fourth place moved him to within four points of Mario. "I made a mistake by taking more of an unnecessary chance at Phoenix," Andretti remarks. "And I paid for it."

At Laguna Seca the following weekend he adopted a more conservative approach although it didn't stop him from taking his eighth pole of the year, beating young bucks Rahal and Sullivan. He also led the first 20 laps before giving way to Rahal and settling in for a point-earning run to second. It was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable way for Mario to drive.



Rahal ran out a convincing winner from Mario with Michael joining them on the podium in third and Al Jr taking fourth. Sneva was out of his element at Laguna Seca, qualifying 15th and finishing 10th, two laps down. One race to go and Andretti had 18 points on Sneva.

The season finale in Las Vegas in November was run on a funky, five-cornered 1.125-mile track laid out in Caesars Palace's parking lot. It was a silly track and resulted in a wild race with plenty of incidents. In the final third of the race Sneva took control, turving Al Unser Sr out of the way and winning his third race of the year. Andretti took another conservative second place, six seconds behind Sneva. The championship was his by 13 points.

"I think that, against my grain, I buckled down and held back in the last two races," Mario ruminates. "I truly think I could've won both those races under any other circumstances. I felt like I had the car to do it at both those races. I hated driving that way but that's what I had to do. It made for a couple of very long days."

Andretti says the points lost early in the year at Phoenix and Indianapolis didn't help. "Some of the early mistakes we made came back to haunt us," he remarks. "That's what made the championship go right to the end. Any one given event could have made all the difference. We probably should've and could've had more victories to our credit, but it wasn't to be. It wasn't a bed of roses by any means. There was a lot of feast or famine. But when it was time to rise to the occasion the team did exactly that. I think that's what made the difference in the end."



Mario won six of 16 races that year, took eight poles and led 572 of 2285 laps. His primary rival Sneva won three races, took two poles and led 480 laps. Andretti's 1984 CART championship was his fourth and last Indycar title, the others coming under USAC sanction in 1965, '66 and '69 with Clint Brawner's team. He was also elected 'Driver of the Year' for the third time by the USA's motor sport writers. Mario first won the award in 1967 when he won the Daytona 500 and Sebring 12 hours, and won it a second time in 1978, his F1 World Championship year.

Andretti raced Indycars for another 10 years, all with Newman/Haas. He scored his 52nd and last Indycar win at Phoenix in 1993 before retiring from racing open-wheel cars at the end of 1994, aged 54, although he continued to race at [Le Mans](#) through 2000 before completing one of the sport's most diverse and epic careers.

Mario drove his first race in 1959 and his last in 2000, a 42-year career that spanned more than 950 starts and included more than 120 wins and an equal number of poles. No other race car driver – [Stirling Moss](#), [Jim Clark](#) and Dan Gurney included – achieved so much across such a broad range of categories.

<http://www.motorsportmagazine.com/race/us-scene/indycar/andrettis-1984-title/>