

## 1967 Daytona 500 win still special to Mario Andretti



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DAYTONA BEACH, Florida – When Mario Andretti pulled into victory lane after winning the Daytona 500 on February 16, 1967 it was at the time the biggest victory of his racing career.

Andretti had already established himself as one of the top young drivers in American racing when he won the 1965 Indianapolis 500 Rookie of the Year Award after starting fourth and finishing third in the Dean Van Lines Special. He would go on to cap his rookie season by winning the United States Auto Club (USAC) IndyCar National Championship. In 1966 he won the pole for the Indianapolis 500 and racked up an incredible eight IndyCar victories in 15 starts to once again claim the USAC IndyCar National Championship.

Andretti was a big-name IndyCar driver who was part of the Holman-Moody Racing team – Ford’s factory-backed team in NASCAR – when he arrived at the 1967 Daytona 500 along with Ford’s “Golden Boy” Fred Lorenzen.

He would go on to blow away the NASCAR competition, leading 112 of the 200 laps in the race and defeating Lorenzen in a race that finished under caution to become the first IndyCar driver to win the Daytona 500.

“At that point I had not won Indy yet,” Andretti said. “I was competitive with a couple of poles but had not won at Indy. So arguably the Daytona 500 win at that time was the biggest event of my career at that time and particularly satisfying to do it somewhere where it wasn’t my

specialty. Can you imagine the same thing as if one of their drivers – Richard Petty or David Pearson -- had come to Indy and won the Indy 500?

“It had a special sound to it and it still does, actually.”

But this wasn't Andretti's first attempt at the Daytona 500. He started 39<sup>th</sup> and finished 37<sup>th</sup> in Car No. 13 in the 1966 Daytona 500 – one of four NASCAR races he competed in during the 1966 season. He was driving for a team owned by an innovator at the Indianapolis 500 during that era.

“The first time at Daytona I was invited by Smokey Yunick – the car owner who owned ‘The Best Damn Garage in Town’ – in a Chevelle,” Andretti recalled. “He was experimenting with me and would give me some weird setups. The car was fast but it was like a Pogo Stick though the corners. Nevertheless, that was my first experience. I knew the banks because I did a lot of testing for Ford for the 24 Hour race. The banks I took to very easily so I felt quite good in a stock car right away. The experience with Smokey was not the best because I was there as a new boy so he was going to do his own weird experiments on the setups that didn't pan out very well. His philosophy was weird about the dynamics of the banking as far as suspension setups.

“But experience was experience – something I used later on.”

He started 12<sup>th</sup> and finished 20<sup>th</sup> in the qualifying race for what would be a 50-car starting lineup for that year's Daytona 500. That meant Andretti had to race his way in unlike today when a certain number of entrant provisional fill in the back rows of the Daytona 500 starting lineup.

“You had to put your best foot forward -- there were no provisionals,” Andretti said. “You were either in or out and the only guarantees were if you were sitting on the front row of single-car qualifying. Other than that you had to race for it. You didn't want to mess up or crash. I had a good engine after qualifying. After that I led a lot of laps but had to stop for fuel. I think I finished sixth or something in the qualifying race. Everyone had to stop for fuel except for Lorenzen. He said he saved fuel – I don't know how. Those were 125-mile races in those days.”

During Andretti's rookie Daytona 500 in 1966 he was one of three IndyCar drivers in that race. Jim Hurtubise finished sixth and A.J. Foyt was 33<sup>rd</sup>.

Despite being an “Open Wheel Guy” Andretti felt welcomed by the mostly Southern collection of Stock Car drivers in NASCAR at that time.

“I always felt welcome, quite honestly,” Andretti admitted. “There were no issues there that I could feel or detect. It was a matter of earning my way through and try to gain some respect. Obviously, I'm sure some of those drivers were laughing at us thinking we were in the wrong place. That is what created a great challenge for all of us from Open Wheel. I never felt anything but welcome when I went to Daytona beginning with Bill France. I had spoken with him when I was doing the sports cars – my first sports car race was in 1965. It was great; it was fine.

“As far as the drivers we were all competitors but I felt we had a good relationship.”

After gaining some experience with Yunick’s Chevrolet he returned in 1967 as part of the powerful Ford team. The American automotive icon recognized Andretti was a star in the making and quickly aligned with the popular Italian immigrant from Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

“I had a great relationship with Ford,” Andretti said. “They were connected with IndyCar and USAC and had the latest overhead cam engines they were providing me. And if I wanted to run in NASCAR I had a factory ride with Holman Moody. Two weeks later I won the 12 Hours of Sebring in a Ford Mark IV with Bruce McLaren. We were pretty much on a roll with Ford.

“It was really satisfying.”

At Daytona, Andretti was teamed with the popular driver from Elmhurst, Illinois and the winner of the 1965 Daytona 500 – “Fast Freddy” Lorenzen.

“He was Ford’s Golden Boy. He was certainly one of the stars of the time and he was winning the big races as Ford’s star in those days,” Andretti said.

When the green flag dropped for the 1967 Daytona 500 Andretti had a car that appeared to be so loose that many of NASCAR’s top drivers didn’t want to get near him. They were afraid Andretti’s car was on the edge of being out of control but the IndyCar driver explained the reason for his unusual racing line.

“Here’s the problem -- I did not have a very good engine in practice and qualifying and I did not get the stuff until I started squeaking,” Andretti explained. “Because of that I qualified with a really low rear spoiler and you had to race with what you qualified with. Because of that when it came to the race setup I didn’t have a lot of downforce. The one good thing about that car is nobody can drive a stupid-loose car but if the car still gives you a feel you can still deal with it. I had to do certain things.

“Here is where I had them all confused. I was really fast because of the small spoiler in the back. I had to lead. Whenever I would follow I was really loose following so I had to lead. And I had to run high because the car that was following me had to stay under me. I couldn’t let anyone pass me on the outside – they would have to pass me on the inside. I knew what I had to do to stay alive so the fact I went for the lead all the time had these guys confused. Most of these guys were content to run second and draft and save fuel and all that. The cars were not as slippery as they are now so you could draft at half-throttle.

“They felt I was very impatient. I led something like 120 of the 200 laps. But it was working for me. I had to do what I had to do because the car was loose. If I had a better engine I would have had the proper spoiler and I would have been all right. I never looked like I was going to crash. I was smoking the right rear tire. I remember Chris Economaki saying, ‘It looks like Mario has an oil leak’ because I was smoking the right-rear tire at the beginning. I was pinching it and smoking going into Turn 1 so I let the car run up the hill a little bit.

“I learned to deal with it. For 500 miles I never turned left. I went into the corner neutral with the steering to the right.”

NASCAR legend David Pearson led 31 laps in that race and had quite a battle with Andretti before Pearson's Dodge engine blew up after 159 laps.

"We had a good time racing each other," Andretti said. "It was very good racing with David. I loved it. That was the best part of the whole day. We were exchanging the lead back and forth. I had no problem racing with him because I was fast. It could have been a good race at the end. But Lorenzen was there, too. I was faster than Lorenzen, clearly, throughout the race."

The end of the race would be a battle of teammates with Andretti and Lorenzen in contention for the victory. That was before politics nearly cost Andretti his big shot at the win.

"Politically I could understand it because I was part time and Lorenzen was their boy," Andretti said. "If there was a choice between he or me winning it was better for them to have Lorenzen win and that ticked me off actually. I came in in the lead and he was second and they let him out and held me back for nine seconds in the pits before they released me.

"But I hunted him down and did my thing."

And from there, he went to victory lane to celebrate the biggest win of his career up to that point. He would go on to win the Indianapolis 500 Pole in 1967 but finished 30<sup>th</sup> in the 500. In the 1968 Indianapolis 500 he started fourth and finished last in the 33-car field.

That year he ran three more NASCAR races, finished 12<sup>th</sup> at Daytona and only ran at Riverside in 1969 – the final NASCAR race of Andretti's career.

"I was running other races and started running Formula One and ran some USAC stock cars," Andretti explained. "I didn't have the time, honestly. I was enjoying sports cars more. There were some conflicts. I was going in a different direction."

When Andretti won the 1969 Indianapolis 500 at that time he was the only driver to win Daytona and Indy in his career before Foyt won the 1972 Daytona 500.

That accomplishment is something that brings great pride to Andretti.

"It was quite a feather in my cap quite honestly and I was very proud of that," he said. "I represented the Open Wheel dudes down there in a good way. I loved that part. And then A.J. joined me and we are still the only ones that have done that."

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