

Happy 75th birthday to legendary driver Mario Andretti!

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Mario Andretti has dominated in nearly every form of racing, making him one of the most iconic drivers of all time.

As Mario Andretti celebrates his 75th birthday on Feb. 28, one of the most magical names in international racing history chooses not to pause and reflect on his extraordinary accomplishments or his remarkable life. He doesn't think back to the long days when he grew up in a displaced persons camp in what is now Croatia from the darkest days Europe ever experienced during World War II. That is when Andretti's native Italy was under siege as a member of the Axis powers during the war. During the Istrian exodus of 1948, Andretti's family was confined to an internment camp in Lucca, Italy, along with other families trying to flee communism in post-World War II Europe.

But there is one day that Andretti will remember on this milestone birthday, and it came on June 16, 1955. The ocean liner carrying Luigi and Rina Andretti's family cruised

into New York Harbor, and the 15-year-old Mario saw the Statue of Liberty gleaming like a beacon of hope at dawn of a glorious summer day.

"That was one memorable morning," Andretti told FOXSports.com from his home in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. "It was June 16, 1955, at 5 a.m. We were sailing past the Statue of Liberty on a beautiful, radiant morning, and we were celebrating my sister Ana Maria's 21st birthday. Here we are celebrating her birthday and coming into the threshold of a new country for our new life. That was truly, truly a memorable morning and a memorable day.

"I remember it vividly - vividly today - it's amazing."

Young Andretti and his entire family had arrived in the United States hoping to chase the American Dream. And what would follow in Mario Andretti's life is one of the greatest success stories in all of racing.

It truly was the land of opportunity for the man who became a motorsports icon. "This was a new life," Andretti said. "There was a lot of curiosity, and I didn't know what to expect. It was a bright day and a new horizon was there for us and we were all very excited. It turned out to be exactly that. I truly lived the American Dream. When you look back at my life, I am a perfect example of living the American dream. "My family came from what is now Croatia (Montona, Istria (Italy), now Motovun, Croatia -- then a part of the Kingdom of Italy), but Yugoslavia occupied that zone after the war. Then Yugoslavia dismantled itself. Now, it's Croatia. It was occupied, and we were shut out. We wanted to maintain our Italian citizenship, so over 350,000 people from that peninsula left just to maintain their Italian citizenship.



[Flashback: Andretti wins 1967 Daytona 500 in historic upset](#)

"It was occupied and important for us to maintain the citizenship we had one choice - to leave or succumb to communism. That's something 350,000 people in that area didn't want to do."

Andretti's uncle had left for the United States a few years earlier and was working at a cement factory in Nazareth. He would sponsor the rest of his family to flee the displaced person's camp to come to America. Mario's father, Luigi, would get a job working at nearby Bethlehem Steel.

Ten years later, Mario was a young man of 25 who had just competed in his first Indianapolis 500, starting fourth and finishing third. He would go on to win the United States Auto Club National Championship for IndyCars as a rookie and was a star on a rapid ascent.

"I won the National Championship in 1965 when I was a rookie, and I was the youngest to do so," Andretti said. "Everyone forgets about that, but it's as important as Indy. Juan Pablo Montoya won the CART title as a rookie in 1999. When I won it in 1965, it was quite a thrill. It couldn't be any better. I was so proud of that. That's the year I became a naturalized citizen, too."

"In 1965, I had only been in this country for 10 years. I was 15 when I arrived here. Looking back at what transpired in just a 10-year period, it was a dream already. That is why when I think about it and look back I think, 'Oh, my gosh - I'm a lucky dude.'"

Fifty years after Andretti's memorable rookie season, the man turns 75, but his legend remains timeless. And he's going to celebrate his birthday doing what he loves the most this time of year.

Andretti is putting on the snowsuit and going racing of a different kind at his lake house in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

"I'm going to snowmobile all day and half of the night," Andretti said. "This has been the best winter we've had in memory in terms of snow. The conditions are fantastic. All of the family will be there. Marco (Andretti, his grandson and Verizon IndyCar Series driver) is even coming up. I'll probably go about 130 or 140 miles per hour on the lake with one of my turbo-sleds. "It's going to be fun."

There is plenty of life left in Mario Andretti, and he plans on living life to its fullest. The few fleeting moments he allows himself to look back, he sees much to be happy about. "I don't get very profound, but I never stopped counting my blessings what I've been able to enjoy how lucky and fortunate I've been," Andretti said. "This gives you reason to pause and look back. Gosh, I'm still around. By law of averages, I shouldn't be but I am. I'm thankful for that and have a great family and friends and I'm still living a

dream."

Andretti's main rival in racing was the legendary A.J. Foyt of Houston. These two created the IndyCar rivalry of the ages - the sport's Golden Age that set a standard that today's Verizon IndyCar Series is measured against. Although today's IndyCar racing has many great drivers, it has never been able to recreate the magic that it had when it was "Foyt vs. Andretti."



Times change and so do legends. Foyt celebrated his 80th birthday on Jan. 16 but continues to struggle from complications following coronary bypass surgery on Nov. 12. Five years younger, Andretti remains active and in great shape.

"To me, you are only wealthy if you are healthy," Andretti said. "I have my health, and I'm thankful for that. What keeps me healthy is staying as close as possible to the sport. For some reason or another, it keeps my adrenaline going, and I have to live on that to live properly."

A look at Andretti on his milestone birthdays shows moments in time. At 25, he was beginning his great IndyCar career.

"I was a determined young lad," Andretti recalled. "I was a guy that had some ambitious goals to go after. I had no Plan B - I only had a Plan A. I was lucky I was progressing throughout my career as well as I could expect. Any time I look back every year as long as I felt further ahead this year than last year, I was in good shape. I could have said that for most of my career.

"I was one determined young guy and one that really loved and enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to do what I loved."

His rookie year at Indianapolis came one year after the 1964 race that will forever be known as "Black Sunday" because of the God-awful double-fatality on the second lap when Dave MacDonald and Eddie Sachs burned to death in one of the most horrific crashes in auto racing history. It was a very dangerous sport back then, but Andretti brought a fearless attitude to his racing career.

"Quite honestly, you could not dwell on that, and it was all around us," Andretti said. "It just wasn't Indy; it was driving sprint cars. I lost friends and had friends injured, losing arms and things like that. I knew the danger of it, but if you are going to do it, you have to accept that fact you are going to be facing that. At the same time, you have to feel that as long as I have things under my control, it's not going to hurt me that bad. "If you dwell on the fact you might get hurt that day, then you don't belong out there. Then you are a danger to yourself and to others."

Andretti would go on to achieve success in a NASCAR stock car by winning the 1967 Daytona 500 and one month later he drove the Ford GT40 Mk IV to victory in the 12 Hours of Sebring with co-driver Bruce McLaren.

But success began to elude Andretti at the Indianapolis 500. He won the pole in 1966 and 1967 and started fourth in 1968. He didn't finish the 500 in any of those years. He crashed an innovative all-wheel-drive machine in practice for the 1969 Indianapolis 500 and the team brought out a backup Brawner Hawk. Of all the cars that Andretti drove that should have won the race, he won the 500 in a car that probably should have never finished the race.

"How do you explain that?" Andretti asked. "We were overheating and had a lot of issues because that car was brand new and we ran it for two races and won at Hanford, California, but still had overheating problems. We ended up winning it. I never thought that thing would last. I was running temperatures of 270 degrees. I don't know how it stayed together."

The car held together and Andretti defeated the legendary Dan Gurney by nearly two minutes. It was team owner Andy Granatelli's first Indy 500 win and the robust team owner gave Andretti a kiss in Victory Lane - one Italian to another.

"It was incredible satisfaction," Andretti recalled. "Here in 1965 I was a rookie and I finished third and everything was fine. With a little testing and luck I was going to put a few of those under my belt. And 1965 was the only one that I finished. In 1969, it was the second time that I finished the Indy 500 and I won it. In 1967, the way my car was I probably could have won 1966 and 1967 two of the easiest races in my life, but we had stupid failures. In 1966 lost a cylinder at the start, and it took Jim Clark three laps to get

around me. I was on seven cylinders - that's how good the car was.

"It was so gratifying to win it in 1969, and it was gratifying for me to win it for Andy knowing what he spent and the effort he had made throughout his career to win Indianapolis with very interesting equipment - the Novis and Turbine cars and here we win with a spare car. There you have it - you never know."

The young and glamorous Andretti had conquered the biggest race in the world with a win in the Indianapolis 500. Next, he took on the world in Formula One and would become the last driver from the United States to win the Formula One World Championship.

"Formula One is what really got me interested in the sport to begin with as a young lad because I was living there and it was an iconic part of our sport," Andretti said. "That is where the dreams began. When I came here, I always had an eye toward Formula One, but I had to get my reputation somehow to try to be a champion here and get noticed. In 1965, I tried real hard and I did befriend Colin Chapman. I said, 'One day I would like to do Formula One.' He said, 'Mario, when you think you are ready for Formula One call me.'

"That is how I got started. I called him in 1968, and the rest is history. I didn't commit to Formula One 100 percent until I was 35 in 1975 because I had too many commitments here. I was contracted to Firestone, and I could not afford to leave that. Things were going well for me here. I was driving three or four Formula One races a year for Ferrari or Lotus or March. I was on pole as the third car on the team and won my first race in South Africa for Ferrari as the third car on the team. I showed I was capable. Two weeks later, I won two Formula One championship races at Ontario, California. Out of the three races that I won, Jackie Stewart was second to me at all of them. That to me was very meaningful. It was like in IndyCars to have A.J. Foyt finish second to you - the best guy out there. That told me something. I can do this. "When I decided to go full time I felt that I was ready."

Andretti won the World Championship in 1978 in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza - □ □ Andretti's homeland. But he never got to celebrate because his teammate and close friend, Ronnie Peterson, was killed at the start of the race.

"Losing my teammate and my friend, Ronnie Peterson, is something you never forget," Andretti said. "You never forget that moment, and there is still sadness to it. It should have been the happiest day in my career, and I couldn't celebrate and justifiably so. Every time I think about it, it's 'Oh my gosh.'"

"Tough moments - tough moments in your life."

After conquering Formula One, Andretti would return to IndyCar and continue his glorious career. He would go on to 52 IndyCar wins in USAC and CART and four National Championships (three in USAC and 1984 in CART).

"All along, I felt I was going to satisfy myself in Formula One and then come back here because my home was here," Andretti said. "Even when I was doing Formula One and won the championship, I was driving IndyCars on my off weekends. I kept my hand in it, and the objective was to come back here and finish my career here. Everything worked out pretty much the way I planned. It was the way I had planned my career." He also got to drive for the greatest team owners in the history of the sport with the exception of Chip Ganassi, whose team did not rise to prominence until after Andretti retired following the 1994 CART season.

"Just to have that opportunity to say that I did drive for the best, that's the reason why I was able to put some results together because I had good equipment," Andretti said. "Chip Ganassi came on the scene about the time I was leaving. I was fortunate enough to say I was with the best at one time or another. During my days in Formula One, I drove for Roger Penske in IndyCars, so when I came back here I had a good car. I also won the IROC Series championship that year."

So here is Mario Andretti at 75 - a man who chooses not to reflect on his life but sees plenty of reason to celebrate. He raced against the best and went on to become the best.

"I can pinch myself for being so lucky to have driven against the icons of the decades of the 1960s all the way up," he said.

"How lucky am I?"

<http://www.foxsports.com/motor/story/happy-75th-birthday-to-legendary-driver-mario-andretti-022815>