

## Mario Andretti remains forever young at heart



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When Mario Andretti celebrated his birthday on February 28 by spending the day snowmobiling at his lake house in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania it's hard to believe this youthful and exuberant man is now 75.

The IndyCar racing legend that won the 1969 Indianapolis 500 has aged with class and dignity. He remains fit and could easily pass for a man in his early 60s -- not his mid-70s.

There are many secrets to Andretti's ability to stay youthful and one of those is the Indy Racing Experience Two-Seater program. Andretti is the primary driver for this innovative concept that gives fans, dignitaries, VIPs and celebrities the thrill of a lifetime by getting a high-speed ride in an IndyCar from one of the greatest legends in racing history.

"Yes, no question about it, that has kept me young," Andretti said from his Nazareth, Pennsylvania home. "To be very honest with you whenever I'm in that cockpit that's my element. I've been doing it the better part of my life.

"Last year at Sonoma when we had the earthquake my hotel was hit pretty hard. We were just a few miles from the epicenter. It scared me like I've never been scared in my life. I was shaking in the parking lot. When I went to the track I was on track at 8 a.m. and I just couldn't settle down.

“As soon as I sat in that cockpit everything was beautiful. My shakes went and everything.

“It’s a great medicine for me.”

When Andretti drove an IndyCar he was among the very best in the history of the sport. He won 52 IndyCar races and four National Championships in USAC and CART. The only driver with more was the legendary A.J. Foyt with 67 IndyCar wins and seven National Championships.

Andretti retired from IndyCar after the 1994 CART season. Except for a test session at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2003 that ended with the then 63-year-old Andretti going airborne in the South Chute after hitting debris that came off Kenny Brack’s car, Andretti longed for the driver’s seat of an IndyCar.

He got his wish in 2010 when he was asked to drive the Honda Two-Seater, at that time part of IZOD’s Fastest Seat in Sports program.

“I embraced the idea,” Andretti said. “I just love those guys at the Indy Racing Experience – Scott Jasek and Joe Kennedy and Jeff Sinden. All those dudes are a great bunch to be with. It’s almost like my team. I loved the idea and when Honda got involved we got state of the art cars the last year or so with the latest chassis and all the good brakes and great stuff. It’s something that I thoroughly enjoy and I’m glad they gave me the opportunity.

“I don’t go to all of the races but I’ll do all the ones that I can. This year I’ll be doing about nine or 10.”

IZOD left as the series sponsor after the 2013 season but the Honda Two-Seater program remained. Verizon is now the sponsor of the Verizon IndyCar Series and Andretti is one of the great ambassadors of the sport when he’s at the track.

The Two-Seater allows Andretti a chance to drive a race car without being in actual competition.

“I loved it so much throughout my career, but I’m realistic,” Andretti admitted. “I’ve had my days and I’m happy with that. My love for it is so profound. In the back of my mind I yearn and think that I could still do this again. Again, it makes no sense.

“The desire and love for it is still very much alive for me.”

The car Andretti drives is an actual Dallara chassis powered by a Honda engine with a modification that puts a passenger seat behind the driver.

“I think we give them quite a ride,” Andretti said. “I don’t take it to the absolute limit. I make sure we are as safe as possible and we are. But at the same time even driving that thing about 90 percent it is still really a good, good ride. The car is good. It has good downforce and is very

stable and has the best of everything. It is fun to drive. The guys that work with me I make some adjustments and that is a no-no and Joe Kennedy rolls his eyes.

“Last year at Sonoma I really had that Turkey going really well. Even in the slow corners I was really quick. That’s very satisfying. That is my fun.”

Andretti can tell when he has given his passenger a tremendous ride and a thrill of a lifetime.

“When they come out of that cockpit with the wow and a big smile, I know I gave them a great ride,” he said. “You can tell when they really had fun. We get that 95 percent of the time. I think everybody that cares to express themselves tells you they never thought it would be like that or has a brand new appreciation for what we do. That’s about as close as you are going to get to the real thing. That is why this program is fantastic for our sport. It gives the opportunity for people to really have an idea what is going on. I don’t think people really appreciate just how good that program is for us to represent the sport.”

Andretti leads a collection of former drivers that includes two-time Indy 500 winners Arie Luyendyk and Al Unser, Jr. as well as former drivers Davey Hamilton and Stephan Gregoire. Aspiring driver Stefan Wilson is also part of the program.

“Let me tell you, a lot of people may not realize the structure they have,” Andretti said. “It’s just like running a race team because all of these guys are racers. They have been there and done that and it’s treated exactly the same in terms of preparation and being up to speed on safeguards. It’s a race car in its own right. If you look at the structure they have it’s as sophisticated as the teams out there. That is what I like about it. They are very, very professional. They always get it done. They are very positive and the ambience is beautiful. We all like each other and get the job done. They do it with a smile, a lot of character, discipline and a lot of love.

“They are a real, true asset to our sports.”

And this program has allowed Andretti to remain connected to the sport he loves with the fans that love him.

“If it wasn’t for this program I would not be attending as many races,” Andretti admitted. “I’m a fan but I’m not one of those. I have been there and unless I’m on the inside and have a business reason to be there I don’t go to races. This is what brings me and keeps me closer to the sport. I’ve done that so much. Just to watch a race and go through all the travel and everything else it would take too much time out of my life just to go watch. To be involved first hand like this I can go through that. This is the only thing that can keep me close to the product, close to the races and makes me travel.”

And it also keeps Andretti feeling young. So as he turned 75 on February 28 Andretti remains young at heart.

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