

Father's Day at 200mph: Mario and Michael Andretti

Mario's son Michael had almost no choice in life but to become a racer, like his legendary father. And in the end, he almost surpassed him. Almost.

BY DENNIS TANG
JUNE 19, 2015
ROADANDTRACK.COM



In the world of motor racing, nothing made of flesh and blood defines "dynasty" quite like the Andretti family. Famed patriarch Mario Andretti is a racing legend, the only man to ever win the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500, and Formula One World Championship. His son Michael is one of the greatest drivers in IndyCar history, third all-time in wins—just behind, who else, his father, and A. J. Foyt. And from Mario's brother Aldo to Michael's brother Jeff, to the third generation of Andretti racers in Michael's son Marco, there is something incontrovertibly distinct about this family, born and bred, that makes them so good at handling a set of wheels.

With Father's Day in the offing, we caught up with Mario and Michael and asked them to talk about how joining the family business, and attempting to live up to your dad's oversized shadow, played out in real life. Here's a short oral history, as they shared it.

When Michael Andretti was born in 1962, his father Mario was 22 years old and still trying to climb up the lower rungs of motorsport—stock cars, midget cars, and the like. But just two years later, Mario was in IndyCar, and in 1965 he won the series championship, and then he was off. Basically, all Michael remembers is his father, the racing star.

Michael: Around when he won Indianapolis [in 1969, when Michael was six], that's when I started to figure out something was different — there was much more commotion around.

Mario: In school, Michael's teacher asked the class, what is your dad's profession? Michael said, "He goes to the airport and makes bread." Because whenever I was leaving for a race he used to ask me where I was going and I'd say, "I'm going to airport, gotta make some bread," and he took it literally!

Mario: When a kid's seven, eight years old, he's not gonna make a decision for himself. But we had some toys—four wheelers—around the house, and the kids took to those so quickly. They were water skiing when they were six years old. So I thought it'd be interesting to see if the two boys would like to drive a go-kart. I took Michael first, to a parking lot, and he liked it and looked good doing it.



LAT USA

Michael: I don't remember my first time behind the wheel, but the first time I actually raced was in a go-kart, when I was nine. It came pretty easily to me. I felt in control all the time, and it felt natural.

Mario: I feel that Michael especially was really attuned to it really quickly, and he was naturally fast immediately. Jeff had to work at it harder a little bit, but he was more analytical. With Michael, it was never a question whether he was going to continue. To Jeff, I kept saying, 'Okay, you don't have to do this if you don't like this.' I tried to make this point as much as I could. 'You were brought into this environment. This is my life, but it doesn't have to be yours.'

Michael: He never pushed me to do it, I asked to do it. But did I feel pressure? Yeah, I did feel the pressure of who I was, what I should be doing, because every person dad talked to, they'd ask me, "So are you going to be a race car driver?"

Mario: I would take them to Europe, to Formula 1 races. My daughter shared the podium with me in Spain, along with King Juan Carlos—they were all exposed to these things.

Mario: You're never born with a steering wheel in your hands, but I look at myself and my brother Aldo: when we fell in love with this sport, our family didn't even own a car. I think there are just some kids who throw a ball or swing a bat straight and fast and easily, and it's that way with racing—I don't know if it's the environment, that they've seen their dads do this, or something else.

Michael enjoyed significant success after his open-wheel racing debut in 1983, with two second-place finishes in the IndyCar World Series and a championship in 1991. He also raced against his father, and then as teammates, on Newman/Haas from 1989 to 1992.



Mario: I tried to put them in the right hands. I didn't have a team myself, so I had to help direct them, which I think I did. But you can never have the perfect plan.

Michael: He was involved in all those moves early on. I wouldn't make decisions without him at that point.

Mario: Michael had things happen pretty quickly, in terms of the progression. With Jeff, it seemed like Michael was taking everything first, so there were fewer opportunities for him. For Jeff there was no first-class ride, and that's what did him in. He was driving the second car at Indy [when he crashed]. It was his only opportunity at the time, and it cost him.

In the incident Mario is referring to, Jeff Andretti suffered a major crash on lap 115 when the left rear wheel on his car came off. Jeff broke both lower legs, both heels, and the toes on his left foot. He did return to racing, but never enjoyed his previous success again. He retired in 1999, and now works as a racing instructor.

Mario: Did I worry? Damn right I did, because I knew the danger was real. There are ways to make a living that are a lot safer. Their mother, my wife, was always very supportive, but she would always roll her eyes and shake her head. Why do you guys have to do this? We always played hard [laughs]. We did things most people don't. And there's no question I was an influence.

For the 1993 Formula 1 season, Michael signed on to the storied McLaren F1 team, and expected to contend for a title. However, internal strife—with the legendary Ayrton Senna halfway out the door, and team test driver Mika Häkkinen a constant threat to receive preferential treatment from the team over Andretti—combined with constricting new rules and regulations to make Michael's sole season in Formula 1 an unqualified disaster.



Michael: He was a big influence on pushing me that I needed to do Formula 1, for sure. There was a point where I was on the fence, and he said if I didn't jump at that opportunity, it would be the biggest mistake of my life.

Mario: When Michael joined McLaren, Senna was supposed to go to Williams. [McLaren team principal] Ron Dennis stole Häkkinen from Lotus—they got him pretty much for free. But the deal didn't go through right away with Senna, so Dennis had three drivers and two cars, and you're not going to sideline Senna, so he signed Senna with the big bucks. But he felt obligated to give Mika some running, so he was depriving Michael of testing.

Michael: It was a program that was never meant to succeed—they never wanted me to. They were playing political games, which upset me.

Mario: It was probably the worst time for him to join the best team. They lost the Honda engine. He had so much stacked against him, but some of the mistakes he made was just because he was impatient. I knew that Michael could do better than he did.

Michael: Häkkinen was never quicker than me in any of the tests we went to, but then on race weekend I'd be much lower priority. I wanted to stick it out in F1, I fought with Ron, but he already wanted me out of the car after my fourth or fifth race. But I got it through Italy and Monza, and actually podiumed in my last race. I was going to stay there and follow through. There's no question in my mind I could've had the success Mika had, because I was always quicker than him.

After his F1 sojourn, Michael returned to IndyCar, where he was immediately successful once again, winning his very first race back, the 1994 Australian FAI Indycar Grand Prix, and led every lap along the way.

Mario: I think Michael should have done the second season [in Formula 1]. Believe me, I know his ability. Mika became a world champion. Michael would've been too, I guarantee you, 100 percent.

Michael: Nobody [in Formula 1] was going to touch me with a ten-foot pole [laughs]. I had no choice but to go back to IndyCar. But it was one of my proudest moments that I was able to get Chip [Ganassi] his very first win.

Mario: I told Michael not to sign a long-term relationship when he went back [to IndyCar], but he did with Newman Haas, and then he got an invitation to join Ferrari when [Michael] Schumacher did. He got an incredible offer and had to turn it down, because the boss wouldn't let him out of his contract.

Michael: Dad wasn't really involved in any of that. I was just trying to save my career, which was at a crossroads at that point. I was going to do what was right for me, and luckily I got the opportunity to come back with Chip, and it really saved me.



Michael finished his CART career with 42 wins and 17 top-ten season finishes. He is now a team principal for Andretti Autosport, which now includes a third generation in the form of his son, IndyCar driver Marco Andretti. Andretti Autosport won the Indianapolis 500, where Michael holds the record for most laps led without winning, in 2014.

Finally, on the occasion of Father's Day, Mario shared one of his favorite memories of him and his son:

Mario: We were racing against each other in the '86 Portland Grand Prix, on Father's Day. He's leading, and I have no chance of catching up. There's three laps to go, and I'm about three seconds back, resigned. But then I hear in the radio that Michael is having fuel problems. By the time we come down for the checkered flag, I beat him by 7/100th of a second. [Michael would come in second for the season, with Mario in fifth.] Michael was so upset. Someone said, "Hey Michael! It's Father's Day." And he said, "Okay, Dad, Happy Father's Day." That was his gift to me. Not that he wanted to give it to me, but I took it. [laughs]

<http://www.roadandtrack.com/car-culture/interviews/interviews/a25930/fathers-day-at-200mph-mario-and-michael-andretti/>