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Do you remember... Mario Andretti's superb Monza comeback

ITALY

Formula1.com

31 Aug 2015

There has been a plethora of memorable stand-in performances in F1 racing's rich history, but for many Mario Andretti's emotional cameo for Ferrari at the 1982 Italian Grand Prix remains the finest of them all...



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"Did I accept as a favour to Mr Ferrari? Well, sure, up to a point. But mainly I did it as a favour to me! Jesus, what kind of guy can say no to Ferrari at Monza?"

Mario Andretti had been out of F1 proper for the best part of a year, racing IndyCars in his homeland, when he received the call from the Old Man. Sure, he had commitments stateside, and no, his last Grand Prix outing - a one-off appearance for Williams at Long Beach earlier in the 1982 season - had not gone at all smoothly, but how could he turn down the chance to race for Ferrari at Monza, the very same circuit where, as a 14-year-old, he'd screamed himself hoarse supporting Prancing Horse star Alberto Ascari?

The answer was simple: he couldn't.

Andretti's Monza invitation had come amid desperate times for the Scuderia, who'd lost talismanic star Gilles Villeneuve to a fatal crash at Zolder in May and then seen his championship-leading team mate Didier Pironi suffer what looked to be career-ending injuries in another horrific shunt at Hockenheim barely three months later. To make matters worse, Patrick Tambay, the man with the unenviable task of filling Villeneuve's vaunted number 27 cockpit, had been forced to pull out of the most recent round at Dijon because of severe back pain.

In short, Ferrari's prospects for their home race - and for their ongoing constructors' championship challenge - looked bleak. Cue the call to Andretti...

The American fit the bill on many levels: not only was he a world champion with a proven track record (including victory at Monza in 1977), he was also familiar with the team's unique character having raced for them in the early Seventies. The fact that he was born and raised in Italy was simply a bonus - both to the mechanics he'd work with and to the Scuderia's adoring Tifosi.

There was just one problem: Andretti had never driven a turbo-powered F1 car before. Worse still, his indifferent showing at Long Beach had led some to question whether, at 42, he still had what it took to compete at the highest level.



Mario Andretti was 42 years old when he drove for Ferrari at the 1982 Italian Grand Prix at Monza.
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"I was never really happy with myself that weekend at Long Beach," he'd explain. "And that was why, if I was going to take up Ferrari's offer I wanted to come over here in good time, do plenty of testing, get to know the car, which wasn't really possible with Frank [Williams] because there was so little time.

"I really need to feel that the car and I are talking to each other before I can really give it a go."

A test was hastily arranged at Fiorano in order to allow Andretti to get to grips with Ferrari's punchy 126C2, and much to the delight of all involved the chemistry between car and driver was almost instant, resulting in a new lap record at the test track.

Hopes for Monza began to rise – as did ticket sales for the event...



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Andretti's only previous outing for Ferrari on home soil in 1972 had yielded seventh, both on the grid and in the race, but the so-called *Americano* was destined to do much, much better for the Scuderia this time around.

Friday's first qualifying session saw Andretti place sixth, the veteran bemoaning the fact that he'd allowed himself to be blocked on several occasions. Saturday, however, was an altogether different story.

In what proved to be an intense final session, Tambay set the pace, sending the assembled masses into raptures. But the excitement levels were soon dimmed when Nelson Piquet then went quicker still in his BMW-powered Brabham. With Tambay having already used his second set of the super sticky qualifying tyres, Ferrari's hopes now lay with their super sub.

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There were just minutes left on the clock when Andretti headed out of the pits for a final time, boost wound to the maximum, anticipation at fever pitch. The two flying laps that followed were nothing short of scorching.

Andretti had snatched pole position back for Ferrari and sent Monza into delirium.



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"Some of it, I guess, is down to me, getting to know the car and all that," said a typically modest Andretti amid a mob of journalists and photographers in the pit lane, "but most of it is down to the engine. Man, it was just fantastic today..."



Mario Andretti (USA) Ferrari 126C2, 3rd place. Formula One World Championship, Italian Grand Prix, Monza, 12 September 1982. © Sutton Motorsport Images

Sadly that very same engine, or at least the turbo part of it, put paid to Andretti's chances of victory on race day, the American eventually coming home a still-admirable third behind Tambay and Renault's Rene Arnoux. But it mattered not - Andretti had silenced his doubters, helped keep Ferrari's championship challenge on course and written his name into Monza folklore once more. More importantly, in the midst of a traumatic year he'd given Ferrari and their devoted following something to smile about.

Comebacks don't get much better.

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