

INDYCAR

Mario Andretti still feels call of Indy

By Mike Hembree, Special for USA TODAY Sports, May 22, 2016



Verizon Indy Car driver Marco Andretti pulls out of the pits while his grandfather Mario watches during practice for the Indianapolis 500 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. (Brian Spurlock, USA TODAY Sports)

NAZARETH, Pa. — Although Mario Andretti's history at Indianapolis Motor Speedway can be viewed through a tortured lens, the track continues to call to the international motor sports champion and 1969 Indy 500 winner.

At 76, Andretti remains a fixture at IMS during May. He checks on his son Michael's team, makes appearances, gives passengers lightning-quick rides around the track in a two-seat Honda race car and spends a fair amount of time simply being Mario Andretti.

“I embrace my opportunities to do the two-seater program,” Andretti told USA TODAY Sports. “I have to have a reason to be at a track — not just as a spectator. I have to have a business reason. Having my family involved is a reason itself. I will always be on



top of it, talking to them. It will always be a part of my life.”

When Andretti zoomed to the 500 win in 1969 as the highlight of a career in acceleration, there was the assumption that he would add other Indy trophies. He was only 29 and commanded rides that were among the best.

Instead of more victory lane garlands, however, Indy dumped repeated disappointment on Andretti. He would not win the 500 again.

In 1972, his potentially victorious car ran out of fuel with six laps to go. In 1981, he was the winner of the race for five months after one of Indy’s most controversial races.

Mario Andretti says Indianapolis Motor Speedway will always be part of my life. (Andrew Weber, USA TODAY Sports

Bobby Unser finished first and Andretti second, but Unser passed cars during a caution period and was penalized one position — to second — by U.S. Auto Club officials, and the official posting of the race results the day after the event showed Andretti as the winner.

A protest followed, and, after hearings and discussions, officials decided to return the win to Unser and fine him \$40,000 for the caution-flag infraction.

Andretti still wears the 1981 Indy winner’s ring, however.

“Every time I see Bobby, I show the ring and say, ‘See that?’ ” he said, smiling.

Andretti finished second to Danny Sullivan in 1985 and led most of the race in 1987 before a faulty valve spring ended his run at the checkers.

Andretti's son, Michael, and his grandson, Marco, are winless at Indy as drivers, a continuation of what has been labeled the Andretti Curse at the world-famous track. Michael won the 500 as a team owner with Dan Wheldon in 2005, Dario Franchitti in 2007 and Ryan Hunter-Reay in 2014.

Mario Andretti long ago accepted the sunlight-and-shadows nature of his relationship with IMS and the 500.

"All I can do is look back at the laps led and the years I had a shot at winning and things like that," he said. Andretti led 557 laps in 29 races at Indy, good for third on the all-time list behind Al Unser Sr. and Ralph DePalma.

Andretti said when he jumped into Indy car racing he set his sights on A.J. Foyt, who would win four Indy 500s.

"You always had to look at the usual suspects," Andretti said. "When I broke into Indy cars, it was A.J. who was doing the most winning. So he's your objective, your goal. If you finish second to A.J., it's a hell of a good day. If you win, it's marvelous — like Christmas."

In a career that brought success in Indy-car racing, NASCAR (a Daytona 500 win) and Formula One (the 1978 world championship), Andretti said he always reached high.

"As long as you're going to set goals, it might as well be for the stars," he said. "When you reach one, that's the reward you're looking for. I had no Plan B in my career. I was going to be a race car driver no matter what. I didn't want to hear about any other possibility.

"My dream when I started was to make a living just driving. When I reached that point, that was goal No. 1. It was one stepping-stone to the next."

With Indianapolis as the place he conquered — and was conquered by.

ANDRETTIS IN THE INDIANAPOLIS 500

Driver	Starts	Best finish	Avg. finish	Laps led
Mario Andretti	29	1969, 1st	17.9	557
Michael Andretti	16	1991, 2nd	11.8	431
Jeff Andretti	3	1991, 15th	20.7	0
John Andretti	12	1991, 5th	18.1	2
Marco Andretti	10	2006, 2nd	10.8	141

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