

A FEW MINUTES WITH ... MARIO ANDRETTI

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#SpeedRead / Indianapolis Motor Speedway Blog

We're chronicling 100 days of Indy 500 history on #SpeedRead leading up to the historic 100th Running. With five days to go, correspondent Phillip B. Wilson spent a few minutes with 1969 Indianapolis 500 winner Mario Andretti to talk about the competitive fire that still burns, two-seater rides and favorite IMS memories.

Phillip B. Wilson: Coming back here for the 100th, what are you thinking about?

Mario Andretti: Aren't we lucky we're able to do this and come back and be part of the celebration? From my standpoint, we have quite a bit of skin in the game with Michael having a five-car team and, of course, my grandson Marco. Everything continues for us and for our family every year. We so look forward to the opportunity to come away with the results here. Again, it never gets old. It's always fresh for us to be part of it and to work toward the goal in the end. As a man who has been here so long, I have so many positive memories here. It's all positive. I was competitive right to the end here, from the beginning to the end. I had a good stretch.



PW: You probably could have driven longer? Probably?

MA: My wife says I should have gone another two years because I was so miserable.

PW: It was tough adjusting?

MA: Yeah. After I came out of the cockpit, she said, 'Maybe you should have done another two years.' Now she's telling me, 'When are you going to grow up?' because I'm driving the two-seater.

PW: You like the two-seater?

MA: Thank God for that opportunity for me. Not just here, but I enjoy doing it throughout the season. I love driving for the Indy Experience. They're the best. I think we've put some smiles on people's faces when they've experienced this. Just 10 minutes ago, Wilbur Shaw's son came over to me. He rode with me three days ago. He said, "I've been around this game all my life and I never, ever had any idea what it would be like." That's what you like to hear. We're giving individuals this experience that you can't actually express. In all my days here, people would say, "What's it like out there?" You can't explain it until you actually experience it because ours is such non-participatory sport.

The premium that we get for this race that we don't get for any other is we get to spend so much time here. From a driver's standpoint, we have the luxury of the preparation. Sometimes, that preparation is too much for some people who came here who could have raced after the first day of practice. Nevertheless, we're here for the long duration of the month. We'll always be able to say we were there for the 100th because we're certainly not going to be here for the next one.

PW: Stealing a page from the movie "The Godfather," are you Don Corleone giving advice to Michael?

MA: (Laughs.) I'm not The Godfather. Obviously I have some experience. If I'm asked, I certainly give my opinion. Yes, of course, we all have some knowledge of this. We've been around long enough. There's always something that's overlooked. Me looking over the shoulder, like watching somebody play poker or pinochle, you always know more for some reason. I'm open with my criticizing if I need to. Sometimes it's received well. Sometimes it's not.

PW: I would think your opinion would carry weight.

MA: I always want the best possible end result for the team. That's all I care for. I'm all-in, for sure. This has been my life and I'm happy that it continues to be so.

PW: Those competitive juices still get flowing when your name is on the call, Michael is invested and Marco is invested and you have several fast drivers this month?

MA: Yes, obviously. That's why it never gets old because it's always a new experience and there are new challenges before you. I watch it all. I want Michael with his team to be so successful. I'm also riding on Marco's shoulder with him. Whether he likes it or not, he's got a wing man there.

PW: Marco wants it so bad, doesn't he?

MA: I know he does. They all do. You're not a race driver if you don't. That's going to be interesting how this thing comes out. It's incredible the competition, how deep it is in the field. It's probably like never before. They obviously don't have as many cars entered, but I go for quality over quantity any time and there's quality right to the last row here. That's a beautiful thing to see.

PW: The top nine are separated by like 1.1 seconds.

MA: It's amazing. Yeah. And that's for four laps!

PW: When I ask about favorite memories, of course you have the 1969 win, when you got into a backup car and Andy Granatelli gave you a kiss in Victory Lane. Is that your favorite memory?

MA: That, obviously, everybody would say yes. But from a family standpoint, one of my most favorite memories was 1991 and 1992, four members of the same family competed here, which has never happened before or since. That to me speaks volumes for the love we have for the sport, on my side of the family and my brother Aldo's side of the family. You could summarize it like we don't know anything else and we don't care about anything else.



Jeff, John, Michael and Mario raced together at the 1991 Indianapolis 500.

PW: I remember the TV camera showing all four of you walking out. And Michael could have won both of those races. Well, he should have won in '92, when his car broke.

MA: Nine laps to go. (Pause.)

PW: Nobody could touch him that day.

MA: Yeah, he was untouchable.

PW: Your 1969 win in Victory Lane, you said you couldn't believe it.

MA: Yeah, in '65, my rookie year, I qualified fourth and finished third. I finished the race. In '66 and '67, I was on pole both times. I had two national championships already. I had a car that probably could have been the easiest of my life. In '67, I would not have beaten Parnelli Jones until his car went down. I know I was the second-best car, but I didn't finish. In '68, I dropped out on the first lap because of a blown engine. In '69, here we come with a state-of-the-art Lotus, four-wheel drive, the latest aerodynamics, we're setting records in practice. That thing comes apart and almost kills me. We have to revert to a car we were never thinking of racing.

PW: You weren't feeling good about getting into a backup car?

MA: No, I wasn't, but that's all I had. But that car had some value. That car had won the race before coming here. That car was a brand new car. Here we go, I'm competitive, I've got one day to work it up to speed. I put it on the middle of the front row, that's pretty good. During the race, I was overheating so bad. I'm nursing it, nursing it. They couldn't change the right-rear tire. We stayed on the same tires. Lo and behold, I finished the race, the second race I've finished in five races, and I won it. And I wasn't supposed to win that because of all the glitches we had. How do explain that? There were other times I dominated. In '87, I dominated that race like nobody.

PW: You were up a lap ...

MA: A lap and a half. Twenty-three laps to go, boom, it goes. There are bittersweet moments.

PW: I wasn't going to bring that up.

MA: No, no, no, I always want to look at the positive side. The fact I led so many laps here, I was competitive until the end, from a personal standpoint, I couldn't ask for more.

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