

Mario Andretti to celebrate 50th anniversary of Daytona 500 win



Mario Andretti at his Bushkill Township home in 2007 with framed photographs of the 1967 Daytona 500. (lehighvalleylive.com file photo)

By Jim Deegan for lehighvalleylive.com

jideegan@lehighvalleylive.com

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Racing legend [Mario Andretti](#) will return to the Daytona 500 this year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his landmark 1967 victory there.

Andretti, who will turn 77 on Feb. 28, will preside over the drivers' meeting for the Feb. 26 NASCAR race and participate in several prerace festivities.

He won Daytona on Feb. 26, 1967, driving the No. 11 Holman-Moody Ford -- at the time the single-biggest victory in a young racing career that would bloom into arguably the greatest of all time.

Andretti, who still lives in Bushkill Township (PA), is one of just two drivers to win the Indianapolis 500 and the Daytona 500. A.J. Foyt is the other.

Andretti captured four IndyCar titles and the 1978 Formula One championship.

His decorated open-wheel career, coupled with his triumph in NASCAR's biggest race, would immortalize him as one of the most versatile and accomplished racers ever to get behind the wheel.

"What's interesting is at that time it was the jewel of the season for NASCAR and it has remained that, which makes it that much more important for me to look back on," he said Monday.

"It's on the other side of the field for me and I have a special appreciation for that. It wasn't where my expertise or specialty was, so to speak. So to be able to win in the biggest race with all the icons of the era who were part of it, it's something I look back on with fondness for sure."

Finishing behind Andretti that day were Ford teammate Fred Lorenzen, who came in second, and NASCAR greats Richard Petty, Bobby Isaac, Buddy Baker, David Pearson, Curtis Turner, Cale Yarborough, Bobby Allison and Red Farmer. Andretti qualified 12th in the 50-car field.

He was named rookie of the year at the Indianapolis 500 in 1965 and had already won two Indy car titles by the time he raced at Daytona in 1967. He competed in the 1966 Daytona 500 but crashed out.

Despite his budding open-wheel career, Andretti said, he felt welcomed by NASCAR's France family to the stock car circuit's biggest stage.

"I didn't feel any animosity whatsoever," said Andretti, who won races in four decades -- the last in April 1993. "The camaraderie with other drivers was there for sure. I'm sure they were not too happy that I won. But we (IndyCar racers) would not be too happy if one of those dudes came to Indy and won over us."

"To be able to win there was a big feather in my cap to be sure. If anything, I might have gained some respect, but I always felt a good solid relationship with those guys."



Age 26 at the time, Andretti led 112 of the 200 laps at Daytona and would go on to win the Indy 500 in 1969.

His 500 miles at Daytona were a wild ride. He drove in qualifying with a relatively flat spoiler to maximize speed, and under the rules was required on race day to use the same spoiler, which provided less downforce and made the car prone to sliding or spinning.

Engine changes were permitted after qualifying, so Andretti had a new engine but the same spoiler.

"The car was really loose," Andretti said. "Once I got the decent engine, I realized I had to race with it and aerodynamically it was going to be loose. I was all over the place when I was following, so I had to lead as much as possible.

"Normally everyone just drafting to save fuel. That's a strategy I had to throw out the window. The bottom line is I was running away from them. I had to really stay up on the wheel. I was riding up against the wall and not driving in a conventional way."

Andretti will serve as honorary race official at the 59th annual Daytona 500, which will be televised at 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 26, on FOX.

Daytona International Speedway President Chip Wile said Andretti has what many consider the most recognizable name in the history of auto racing.

"His victory here in 1967 has grown to legendary status and is truly one of the most significant moments in the history of the speedway and our community," Wile said.

Andretti said he's looking forward to the honor and the start of the auto racing season, which calls for plenty of traveling on his part.

"Nazareth is still my home," he said. "The traveling is normal for me. That's the way I like it and that's the way we go on."

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