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Mario Andretti: “Without adrenaline I’d die”

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MARIO ANDRETTI is a legend in the world of auto racing, and still as comfortable behind the wheel as ever. Mo Rocca hitched a ride with him for our *Sunday Profile*:

You would’ve thought Rocca would be nervous climbing into the backseat of a racecar at Sonoma Raceway. But when the driver is a 77-year-old grandfather, why worry?

And then they took off, hitting speeds of 180 miles an hour. Who does Gramps think he is, Mario Andretti?

Well, actually, yes!

“I’m an adrenaline junkie,” Andretti said. “And without adrenaline I’d die.”



The motor sports legend compares sitting behind the wheel of a race car to conquering a wild animal. **CBS NEWS**

Even though he's long-retired from racing, every few weeks Mario Andretti takes the wheel at racetracks around the country, as part of the Indy Racing Experience. He and his fellow drivers give thrilling (and somewhat terrifying) rides to everyone, from big-time racing fans like Greg Leichner of San Jose ("If you take a rollercoaster and multiply it by about five, that might be close -- but there are no rails!") to NBA superstar Stephen Curry ("That was unbelievable!").



Race car driver Mario Andretti waves from the winner's circle after winning the Indianapolis 500, May 30, 1969.

AP

Andretti is arguably the greatest racecar driver of all time. During his half-century-long career, it seems there was no car he couldn't tame.

"I always say, just like an animal trainer: If you can make a tiger or something that can destroy you purr, you're a darned good animal trainer," he told

Rocca. "And this is the same thing. You gotta make that car that can destroy you, make it purr, make it do the things you want it to do. That's the appeal."

What always made Andretti stand out from the pack was his versatility. He won on ovals, on road courses, and on dirt. No wonder the Associated Press named him the Driver of the Century.

And he doesn't keep his trophies separated or categorized: "That's exactly right. I would go from the Grand Prix of Italy to the Hoosier 100 in Indianapolis, to run on the fairgrounds on that dirt track race."

He even has a trophy from Hot Wheels. "Who wouldn't want that? That, to me, would be the pinnacle!" Rocca laughed.

"Little kids would think so, anyway," Andretti offered.

Mario Andretti's road started in Italy, where the end of World War II left his family in a refugee camp in Lucca. The family didn't own a car, but he and his twin brother, Aldo, parked cars in a local garage.

"We were just testing some standing starts -- a little bit of burnouts and so forth," he recalled. "So that's how I learned my standing starts in Formula One, with some of these poor customers' cars. Whenever I valet the car today, I'm thinking, 'I wonder if they're doing the same thing I was doing to these people?'"

Note to self: Always self park!

When he wasn't abusing other people's cars, he was watching American racing at the movies, and dreaming.

When he wasn't abusing other people's cars, he was at the movies, watching racing, like "To Please a Lady" starring Clark Gable as a midget car racer. And then when Mario was 15, the Andrettis came to America. They settled in Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

Right after moving in to their first house, Mario and Aldo noticed a commotion nearby: "Big lights about, maybe, a mile away. It was at a fairgrounds. And all of a sudden, a big explosion of engines. 'Oh!' Aldo and I looked at each other. We booked! Followed the roar of the engines, and here was local half-a-mile dirt track."

"That made you and your brother run? And when you got here, you found?"

"We found our future."

The brothers cobbled together a own race car, and Mario began building toward a family of his own.

"Met him when I was more about 16, at a holy family dance, the church dance," said Dee Ann Andretti.

That was the start of a 55-year (and counting) marriage.

Rocca asked her, "He was already all about motor sports, right?"

"Oh yes. I don't think he had anything else on his mind," she laughed.

"Well, he must have had something else on his mind because you started dating?"

"Yeah, well, that's true!"

Mario recalled, "I said, 'Well, you know, if I'm ever given anything in my life, I hope I have the opportunity to become a race driver.' And from there on, quite honestly, I never really had a Plan B in my head."

Mario's sons, Michael and Jeffrey, and nephew, John, followed him into racing. If you want to understand just how competitive Mario Andretti is, consider the Portland Grand Prix in 1986, when he raced against Michael. The last lap came down to father and son, neck and neck.

"They said, 'Michael's starting to have some fuel problems,'" Mario recalled. "And so I just stood up on the seat. And we were coming down for a drag race to the checkered flag. And I beat him by two inches. And we were on podium and he was not happy. Somebody told him, 'Michael, Michael, it's Father's Day.'"

“When you heard on the radio your son is having problems, were you thinking, ‘Yes!’?”

“Yes!” Mario laughed. “Don’t tell him that.”

Dee Ann said she hated when both her husband and son were together on the track, “because neither one would give an inch. So it’s scary.”

“Scary” doesn’t begin to define auto racing. A list of Andretti’s friends who were lost in the sport include Red Riegel, Jud Larson, Dick Atkins, Don Branson, Billy Foster and Ronnie Peterson. “That’s the dark side of the sport, obviously,” Andretti said. “These were some my closest friends that I lost in the sport.”

“When most of these men died, you already had kids,” said Rocca. “Did your wife say, ‘You’ve got to stop doing this?’”

“No,” Andretti replied. “I know what she was going through, obviously, because we were going through it together. Dee Ann was such a rock for me. And she, in so many ways, I would say she suffered in silence.”

“I guess that’s right what I did, yes,” she said.

Rocca asked Dee Ann, “Was there ever a moment where you thought, ‘I gotta tell him to stop this ‘cause we have kids’?”

“No, because I knew what I was getting in for. You don’t stop somebody if they have a real goal in life.”

“Did you ever think, ‘I might have to end up raising these kids alone’?”

“Oh, I often thought of that, yeah. But it’s just the risk you take.”

Andretti competed in almost 900 races, missing only two because of injury. He walked away from a triple summersault at Indianapolis in 2003.

Rocca asked, “You knew how competitive he was?”

“Oh, yes. For sure,” said Andretti’s wife.

“And still is?”

“Uh-huh. Yes.”

So you’d think that just maybe, in his eighth decade, Mario Andretti would be ready to put it in park. And indeed, you can sometimes find a more mellow Mario at his winery in California’s Napa Valley, hoisting a glass of Sangiovese with the wine tourists.

“When I’m here, when I bring the family here, it just really replenishes my spirit,” he said. “There is something just soothing ... and not just the fact that you enjoy a couple of glasses. But this is really a labor of love.”



Mo Rocca and Mario Andretti at the Andretti Winery in Napa Valley.

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But then Sunday comes, and Mario is back at the track. His grandson, Marco, is driving these days for the Andretti team led by Mario’s son, Michael. Look in the pit, and there’s Grandpa.

Does Marco want his grandfather’s advice? “He takes it. I mean, how should I say? I volunteer some advice!” Andretti laughed.

Rocca asked Marco, “And when he comes to see you race, does he come as your grandfather or as a racing legend that might have advice?”

“He comes as my grandfather, you know, that really pulls for me, wants the best,” Marco replied. “It kills him as much as it kills me when it doesn’t go right. So to have that support, it definitely feels good.”

Even at this stage in his career, when asked to describe race day, Mario Andretti says it is always special. “Race day is always a new day. When I was younger, I said some day when I become more mature I’m gonna lose those butterflies, and I never did. From the first race to the last race, I had those same butterflies. And you know why? Because it meant something to me.”

Perhaps the best word to describe Mario Andretti? Driven.

Rocca asked, “To you does it feel a little bit like you’re back in it suddenly when you get in the car?”

“Always,” Andretti replied. “It’s my element. When they put me in the box it’s gonna have to have wheels on it!”

For more info:

- [Mario Andretti](#) (Official site)
- [Indy Racing Experience](#)
- [Andretti Winery](#), Napa, Calif.
- [Sonoma Raceway](#), Sonoma, Calif.

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