



Mario Andretti is still loving his role as a racing ambassador at age 77.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

## **Mario Andretti: Racing royalty has no intention of slowing down** **AUTOWEEK CATCHES UP WITH RACING GREAT**

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Mario Andretti ... the name rolls off the tongue, like that of royalty.

Which, essentially, he is.

More than two decades after retiring from a decorated racing career, Andretti remains Super Mario. Like Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan and a handful of others, his name rings bells beyond the boundaries of the sports world and is a global franchise that carries the positive weight of a lifetime of success.

Andretti will be 78 in February, yet he is one of the youngest of a generation of superstars who survived some of the deadliest years in the history of auto racing. Those still rolling along in retirement include A.J. Foyt, Richard Petty, Cale Yarborough, Bobby Allison, Johnny Rutherford and David Pearson — all older than Andretti.

Of the all-time greats, Andretti and Petty remain the most active and most visible.

Petty, winner of 200 NASCAR Cup races, has been stock-car racing's No. 1 ambassador since his early driving days almost 60 years ago. An icon of the sports world, he continues to attend

almost every Cup race as part-owner of a Ford team and remains a favorite — and willing — target of autograph-seekers.

A contemporary of Petty's (although their paths seldom crossed in competition), Andretti built a bigger platform on the world stage, winning in IndyCar, Formula 1, sports cars and stock cars. He can view the totality of international motorsports from an aerie few will ever share.

Of the names most often mentioned in arguments about the greatest American driver of all time, Andretti, Foyt, Petty and Dale Earnhardt Sr. are favorite subjects, with Andretti often winning the day because he was so accomplished across a variety of disciplines.



Mario Andretti was a winner in Indy cars, sports cars, stock cars and in Formula 1.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

Andretti raced more or less full time from 1964 to 1994, winning a Formula 1 championship, the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500 and four IndyCar titles while totaling more than 100 victories in a wide variety of series. Upon retirement, he could have ridden off into a glorious sunset, his trophies and medals and other hardware clanking along behind, bound for time at his Florida condo, watching reruns at his palatial Pennsylvania home or cruising the back roads of his native Italy (his family immigrated here when he was a teenager).

Instead, Andretti is as busy as ever, with one hand in racing, another in the inner workings of a winery, another (yes, he evidently has more than two hands) in academia and yet one more in the business world, all continuing to wrap his name around the globe.

“All of this is no surprise,” said former world driving champion Jackie Stewart, himself still pedaling away at age 77. “His name is still globally recognized. He’s protected his name extremely well and with considerable dignity.”



Andretti has long been one of the best interviews in sports.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

On May 16, the diversity of Andretti’s post-racing life was underlined again when he received the Clio Stuart Scott Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his impact on sports business, marketing and advertising.

Although Andretti—who, oh by the way, has also been knighted in Italy—doesn’t have a typical weekly schedule, his itinerary might include:

-- Two or three days at the IndyCar track of the moment, where he checks on the progress of Andretti Autosport and the cars owned by his son, Michael, and driven by his grandson, Marco. Andretti also often provides rides for guests in a two-seater Honda race car, driving at speeds fast enough to excite himself and accelerate the heartbeats of passengers.

-- A visit to Andretti Winery in Napa, California, where winemaker Bob Pepi serves as Andretti’s “chief mechanic” of finer beverages. “In his racing career, Mario has been lucky enough to be exposed to some great wines around the world. He had an idea of what he liked and what would be appreciated by customers, and that’s where we’ve gone,” Pepi said.

-- Being in the halls of higher learning, where a business management professor is preparing a curriculum on leadership based on Andretti and his successes.

-- Making appearances, speaking for or otherwise promoting a number of businesses, including some that have been with him for much of his life.

-- Just being Mario, which, based on those seeking some time with him, can be a full-time gig by itself.

His face, though showing the lines of age and literal hard knocks, remains handsome, a rugged older version of the look that set hearts racing on pit roads across continents for decades.



Andretti's full-time job is being Mario Andretti.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

"I'm still living the dream only because I'm doing things I enjoy," Andretti said. "I'm still connected with the sport because I love it so much and because we (the Andrettis) have skin in the game.

"I love Formula 1. It's my other home. And NASCAR — I have good friends there."

Andretti's most direct connection with his glory days is with the two-seater rides. Ostensibly, they are for the guests who sit behind Andretti for at-speed trips around many of the circuits the IndyCar Series visits. But Andretti seems to be the biggest benefactor.

"I think we've allowed him to extend his career, so to speak," said Scott Jasek, co-owner of the Indy Racing Experience. "You're Mario Andretti, and your passion your whole life is driving a race car. We give him that ability. I think he's getting a bigger thrill out of it than the passengers."

The passengers, though, step out of the car with a certain sort of glow, one ignited by cruising at 190 mph around Indianapolis Motor Speedway with one of racing's best ever.

"He can still hustle a car," said rider Gary Wilmoth at Indy. "I'm still catching my breath. It feels like you're on the edge in the turns. There's a history with him. It's amazing."

Since last year's Indy 500, Andretti has driven the two-seater hundreds of miles.



Andretti says he's still taking life "to the maximum."

PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

Andretti's so-called golden years also include tennis, waterskiing and flying an ultralight. He is 77 in numbers only.

"I don't know how long this is going to last," he said. "Ultimately, age has to catch up to you. But I don't even want to think about it. I'll worry about it when I get there."

He seems to be a lap ahead of whatever the inevitable is.

People in high places notice the Andretti verve. Among them is University of San Francisco professor Thomas Maier, who is centering a case study for business management students on Andretti's post-racing history.

"I thought it would be a good academic case study to tell the story of Mario through the lens of leadership and inspiration and also talk about his legacy with his son and grandson," Maier said. "His story as an immigrant offers such a promise and hope and dream for so many people. It's a wonderful story."



Maier has interviewed Andretti several times and plans to talk to others in the Andretti circle before completing the project this summer.

Fifteen-year-old Mario had no clue that his life would lead to such examination when he and the rest of his family sailed into New York Harbor June 16, 1955, looking for a new day on the shores of a new country.

“I can still remember that day like it was yesterday,” Andretti said. “The sun rising as we sailed under the Statue of Liberty, the city in the background. It was made more memorable by the fact it was my sister’s birthday. A special day. Very special.”



Andretti's career includes a Formula 1 championship, Indy 500 win and a win in the Daytona 500.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

Mario and his twin brother, Aldo, had gotten the racing bug in Italy, where they became fans of F1 and looked forward to maybe one day racing themselves. They thought the move to America would blunt those hopes; instead, the fact that the family settled near Nazareth Speedway in Pennsylvania rekindled their dream.

They built crude race cars and began spinning laps at local tracks, tentative steps that led to Mario winning races at motorsport capitals around the world (Aldo gave up driving after a pair of serious accidents).

Andretti raced through one of the deadliest periods in motorsport history. In the 1960s and '70s, tracks sometimes became killing fields, and driver deaths, while obviously disturbing, often were viewed as part of the game.

Stewart, Andretti and other drivers eventually took the lead toward a greater emphasis on safety, a key reason so many racing heroes of the second half of the 20th century remain alive to tell tales.

“To lose four or five guys a year was not acceptable,” Andretti said. “Sponsors who put millions of dollars in the sport don’t want to go to funerals. They want to celebrate. And the sport would have lost itself. The sport has grown in a very responsible way, in that respect. We’re the lucky ones who pulled through.”

Those who thought Andretti might detour to a quieter lifestyle after driving, after surviving the minefields that killed teammates and friends, could not have been more mistaken. He had many more miles to run.

The carousel spins on.

“I’ve been able to be around the game for so long,” he said. “I’m taking it to the maximum because it’s enjoyable for me. It’s the life that I relish, the life that I want. So it continues.”

**By Mike Hembree**



<http://www.autoweek.com/article/indycar/mario-andretti-racing-royalty-has-no-intention-slown-down>