

A night to remember for Mario Andretti

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Published 4:17 p.m. ET Sept. 1, 2017 | Updated 6:25 p.m. ET Sept. 2, 2017

Racing legend Mario Andretti was extremely thankful Aug. 31 after receiving the Cameron R. Argetsinger Award at the Corning Museum of Glass.



(Photo: Mark J. Rebilas / USA TODAY Sports)

Maybe it was hyperbole and undoubtedly he was caught up in the moment, but Mario Andretti was clearly being sincere when he called Thursday the greatest day of his life.

A cascade of racing's biggest names – from Richard Petty to Dan Gurney to Bobby Unser – took turns in person and on video thanking Andretti for his towering impact on their careers and their sport during a ceremony at the Corning Museum of Glass in which Andretti became the fourth winner of the Cameron R. Argetsinger Award. The honor is named for the man responsible for bringing racing to Watkins Glen in 1948.

The award was presented by the Watkins Glen-based International Motor Racing Research Center for outstanding contributions to motorsports. IMRRC boasts former driver Bobby

Rahal as chairman of its governing council and past Argetsinger Award winners included Chip Ganassi, Petty and Roger Penske, who also honored Andretti with a video tribute.

The reason for the outpouring was simple: Mario Andretti, now 77, is not simply a racing legend, he is *the* racing legend.

His racing accomplishments are as numerous as they are impressive. Among the highlights are becoming the only driver to win the Indy 500, Daytona 500 and Formula One world championship. In 1999, Andretti and A.J. Foyt were voted Co-Drivers of the Century by a panel of experts assembled by the Associated Press. As an indication of Andretti's versatility, seven types of cars were represented in a montage painting from well-known motorsports artist Randy Owens that was auctioned off for \$7,500 at night's end.

Andretti made his Formula One debut at Watkins Glen in 1968 and drove to the pole position that day. His Watkins Glen career also included a Six Hours victory in 1972 along with Jacky Ickx.

He is a pop culture icon. As emcee Dr. Jerry Punch pointed out, 96 musical artists have written songs referencing Mario Andretti, ranging from Amy Grant to the Beastie Boys to Ice Cube. Teen drivers, to this day, are cautioned to remember they're not Mario Andretti when hitting the road.

Retired IndyCar Series star Dario Franchitti, a native of Scotland, would have been named Mario if his Andretti-loving father had his way. His mom nixed that idea by a single letter. Dario said it was a dream since he was 5 years old to meet Andretti. That finally happened 19 years later and Franchitti said he was so flummoxed he pretty much crashed afterward.

"Mario, you're my hero," Franchitti said at the ceremony.

Perhaps no driver has heard those words as much as Andretti. He heard them about a dozen times more Thursday.

Watkins Glen International President Michael Printup grew up idolizing Andretti and relayed a story of meeting him for a second time in the Detroit airport several years ago. Printup proudly brought over his oldest son, 4-year-old Brendan, to meet Andretti. Knowing Brendan's favorite driver was Michael Andretti, Mario's son, Printup asked Brendan to tell Mr. Andretti his favorite driver. Brendan responded, "Dad, that's easy. ... Juan Pablo."

Ganassi, who was among those in attendance, first met Andretti at age 11, getting his autograph along with other drivers at the Glen Motor Inn in Watkins Glen. Ganassi and his

family had made a trip from Pittsburgh to tour Corning Glass and his mom took them to Watkins Glen, knowing how much Chip enjoyed racing.

Several years later Ganassi drove Andretti's car as a rookie at the Indianapolis 500 in 1982, working alongside Mario's sons, Michael and Jeff. That led to Mario Andretti taking Ganassi under his wing, helping him become one of racing's all-time winningest car owners.

"I can honestly say, Mario, that any success I've attained in the sport, you can draw a direct line straight back to your mentorship," he told the crowd. "As I've told you many times, you have a lot of stock in any success I've ever had and I thank you for that. Ladies and gentlemen, he is simply the greatest of all time."



Mario Andretti and Lady Gaga before the start of the Indy 500 in May of 2016.
(Photo: Michael Hickey / Getty Images)

Even his former competitors can't help but admire Andretti. Unser was part of the ceremony's numerous video tributes and had the honor of being the only one who had to be bleeped as he shared his thoughts on Andretti.

"I wanted to send a congratulations to you," Unser said. "You dang sure deserve it. Our history as competitors has for sure been a long and colorful one. When all is said and done, hopefully we'll all be good friends."

"It makes me think of a day in Italy when you had me driving the car to get to the racetrack and you wouldn't talk to the Italian soldier at the gate. And you dang near got me shot. ... I always laugh when I think about it."

As a 5-year-old, I lived down the hill from Watkins Glen International in Montour Falls. I was oblivious to the crowds and excitement of the U.S. Grand Prix as it took place a few miles away in the 1970s, but the racing name that had an aura attached to it for me even then was Mario Andretti.

Andretti is his sport's bridge. He connects NASCAR to Formula One. He is a hero to racing fans and common ground for people who have never watched a race. Andretti is the biggest name in U.S. racing history while also having international appeal. He came to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, along with his family when he was 15, moving over from what was then northern Italy and is now part of Croatia.

Andretti remains a fixture in the Verizon IndyCar Series, driving the two-seat car in pre-race activities. Michael Andretti is a car owner in the series and Mario's grandson, Marco, is a driver. The family is back together at Watkins Glen for Sunday afternoon's IndyCar Grand Prix at The Glen.

We were reminded again Thursday why Mario Andretti is an American treasure. For his part, Andretti couldn't help be overwhelmed by the outpouring of gratitude he immediately gave right back.

"I just told Bobby (Rahal), 'This is the greatest day of my life,'" Andretti said. "Everyone is so kind, I can not even believe what I was hearing. This is the most amazing evening that I've ever spent. When you're fortunate around to be around as long as I have, you make so many friends.

"This is going to be the event for me, quite honestly. I've been so fortunate, but I've never, ever, ever experienced anything like this ever. I'm so grateful."

So are we.

<http://www.stargazette.com/story/sports/motor/2017/09/01/night-remember-mario-andretti/625824001/>