

50th anniversary party: Indy 500 to commemorate Mario Andretti's first and only victory



Andretti on the front straight of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with his 1969 Indy 500 winning car (left) and the Camaro pace car from that year. INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY PHOTO

By Paul Reinhard
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Mario Andretti said on Wednesday that May 30, 1969, “seems like 100 years ago or yesterday.”

The 78-year-old Italian immigrant and legendary race car driver, who has made Nazareth his home for the last 63 years while making a name for himself all around the world, will never forget the day he won the Indianapolis 500.

In fact, he said Wednesday that, after finishing the '69 race, "I thought, from here on it's going to be easy; we'll [win] half a dozen ..."

He tried 24 more times to get a second one, but never did. And that makes 1969 even more precious.

Even so, the people who run the annual 500-mile race that has been dubbed "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing" have not forgotten, and they're going to make sure the world still remembers it, too.

Andretti was on hand at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Wednesday for a live-streamed announcement that the 50th anniversary of Mario's 1969 "500" triumph will pay special tribute to the man who is arguably still the most recognized name in auto racing, even though he retired at the end of the 1994 season. He was named Driver of the Century at the end of 1999.

The announcement of the accolades that will be piled on Andretti in May came on the same day the IndyCar Series announced that the NBC Sports Group would become the home of all 17 races in the series, including the 103rd Indy 500. Nine races will be on NBC, eight others on NBCSN.

Mario Andretti has been the No. 1 ambassador for IndyCar racing – not only because his son, Michael, is the owner of a handful of cars in the series and Michael's son, Marco, is an active driver who continues to pursue the family dream of another Indianapolis win.

And it all started that day that Mario Wednesday called "the greatest moment of my life," when he drove into Victory Lane for that swig of milk and an impromptu kiss from car owner Andy Granatelli.

IMS President J. Douglas Boles made the announcement of the Andretti-2019 Indy 500 connection, which will include, but not be limited to,

- A commemorative logo that will be used on the cover of the race program, on special merchandise and other places to celebrate the anniversary;
- The coveted bronze badges that have long served as credentials that allow garage and pit lane access will feature Andretti;
- Beginning May 1, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum will feature a special Andretti section devoted to his entire career.

When Boles mentioned the badges, Andretti, who obviously knew nothing about that particular honor, blurted out emotionally, "Wow, you know how much I wanted this, how much I fought for one [badge] when I was a kid?"

"Now you're going to see them everywhere," Boles said.



Mario Andretti and grandson at last year's Indy 500. (Michael Conroy / AP)

Because Andretti is still so involved in IndyCar Series racing – he gives high-speed, two-seater Indy-car rides at many tracks on the circuit — he will be around IMS almost all of May. He has always said it's the one place that attracts old-timers like himself, who can recreate some of those more historic events.

“It's the only race on the globe that is worth the championship,” he said Wednesday. He admitted that he really understood how far-reaching the “500” was when he was invited to appear on Johnny Carson's late-night television show after the 1965 season. He had just won the USAC National championship as a 25-year-old rookie, but when he was introduced, it was as the rookie of the year at the Indianapolis 500. He finished third in his first start.

He failed to finish in 1966, 1967 and 1968. In 1969, he crashed his primary car in practice when a wheel snapped off in the fourth turn “and almost killed myself, destroying the car,” he said Wednesday.

His team, headed by chief mechanic Clint Brawner, had to go to a used car in which Andretti had won a '69 race in Hanford, Calif., but which was never intended to race at Indy.

Five years ago, Andretti told *The Morning Call* that so many things pointed to anything but a victory in the Brawner Hawk, the result on May 30, 1969, was “to my absolute surprise.”

He'll relive that “surprise” all over again in 136 days. Gladly.