

Mario Andretti documentary to help ramp up NBC's IndyCar coverage

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Photo Credit: NBC Sports

When NBC Sports film producer Matt Allen arrived at Mario Andretti's home in Nazareth, Pa., he brought with him a stack of newspapers.

Little did he know that the first newspaper to appear in the documentary "Drive Like Andretti" wouldn't be in that stack. Several copies of The Indianapolis News from May 30, 1969, sent by a fan, had arrived on Andretti's doorstep the day before with the front-page headline "MARIO WINS 500." They were printed the evening after Andretti's first and only win at the Indianapolis 500.

When Andretti flips one of the copies open and begins reading, the story of his illustrious racing career, and life, begins.

Andretti and Allen were both in Austin last week during South by Southwest, along with defending Indy 500 champion Will Power, to preview the film. This weekend the entire IndyCar paddock comes to Austin for the series' debut at Circuit of the Americas.

The IndyCar Classic will air at noon Sunday on NBCSN, part of NBC's season-long coverage of IndyCar that for the first time includes the Indy 500. "Drive Like Andretti" is part of the buildup to "the Brickyard," and will air May 11 as a lead-in to the IndyCar Grand Prix in Indianapolis. The Indy 500 is on May 26.

"There is so much energy and there has been ever since the announcement," said Leigh Diffey, the voice of IndyCar on NBC, of the network's increased coverage of the sport. "It was always a source of frustration that we couldn't do the whole season."

NBCSN has been a broadcast partner with IndyCar since 2008, but until this spring ABC was the only network to show the Indy 500 starting in 1965. The documentary is part of NBC's increased investment in covering IndyCar, and includes interviews with Andretti in Croatia, Italy, Pennsylvania, his winery in Napa, Calif., and at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Allen, who works mainly on NBC's storytelling efforts around the Olympics, said he didn't know much about the racing icon before the assignment. His hope is that he found something for everybody, including non-motorsports fans.

The film touches on Andretti's influence in popular culture and music, and features interviews with Ludacris, Ice-T, Jay Leno, Tim Allen, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and NASA Apollo 10 astronaut Gen. Thomas P. Stafford. It also captures Andretti's gregarious personality still very much alive at 79 years old.

But to have him relive some of the early moments, including his journey to the United States as a 14-year-old Italian refugee, Allen relied on the work of journalists who covered Andretti throughout his career.

"It occurred to us, rather than go out and hire a writer or write some lines for someone else to read about Mario, there's incredible writers out there in the world already who lived and breathed these moments right alongside him," Allen said.

The words had their desired effect. Reading through the newspaper clippings, laid out on a desk inside his home, there are several moments when nostalgia sweeps over him.

"It's a bit of destiny for me, for sure," he says, laying one clipping back onto the pile. "It tells you everything."

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