

The legends of 1969: Mario Andretti's unlikely Indy 500 victory filled with racing lore

[Jim Ayello](#), Indianapolis Star

Published 6:47 p.m. ET May 16, 2019 | Updated 7:53 p.m. ET May 16, 2019

INDIANAPOLIS — Fifty years later, Mario Andretti calls his lone Indianapolis 500 victory fate. Destiny. On May 30, 1969, the track chose him.

Andretti did not enjoy much good fortune at Indianapolis Motor Speedway before then — or after. He finished last in 1968, and in the years following his sensational rookie debut in 1965, he was plagued by just about every misfortune a driver could experience at the speedway. And, of course, the heartbreak he and the Andretti clan have suffered at Indianapolis in the years since have become the stuff of legend.



Mario Andretti is shown after winning the 1969 Indianapolis 500. (Photo: Indianapolis News)

But 1969, that was a special year, a special race filled with some of the most memorable moments in 500 history. Recently, IndyStar had a chance to chat with Andretti as well as a couple of members of that race-winning team to reflect on how the legends of the race-winning Brawner Hawk, the Granatelli kiss and all the rest came to pass.

The crash

Before the Brawner Hawk ever crossed the finish line, there was Colin Chapman's Lotus 64, a four-wheel drive Ford built to run at the Indianapolis 500. Though Andretti and his team had already won a race at Hanford in the Hawk, Andretti adored the Lotus. It was all kinds of fast. Unfortunately, Clint Brawner and Jim McGee — his co-chief mechanics — loathed it. That's because the Lotus was also all kinds of unreliable.

“We didn't like the car,” said McGee, Brawner's protege, who would be with Andretti for 17 of his 29 years in Indy cars. “We tested it at Hanford and went back to England, and they had to make about 200 changes. ... It had all kinds of problems. Heating and stuff like that. It was not proven. It hadn't run a race.

“We had no faith in that car at all. We knew it was fast, but we knew it would never finish. It had no miles on it. If you wanted to win Indy, you don't come here with a car with zero miles on it.”

McGee and Brawner's doubts would prove warranted. Though Andretti dominated the speed charts in the Lotus during practice, two days before time trials, he suffered a horrific crash in Turn 4.

As the bright red No. 2 STP car slammed in the wall, it burst into flames, pieces of it scattering across the track.

It was just as McGee and Brawner had suspected all along.

“We had questioned the running gear, the hubs and stuff on it,” McGee said. “Colin Chapman, to save time and money, used Formula One hubs and uprights and stuff. And we asked him about it with the loads at Indianapolis and everything like that, and he convinced us it would be OK. But we were skeptical. ... Of course, it was the hub that broke during practice.”

A post-mortem showed an overall structural weakness in the hubs, so Chapman withdrew the Lotus cars he'd built for not only Andretti but Jochen Rindt and Graham Hill as well.

The best thing McGee could say about the Lotus, outside of its blazing speed, is that the car absorbed the impact better than most cars of its era would have.

“It had a lot of small parts, so it took the blow very well,” McGee said. “The thing flew apart, but when cars are doing that, they're taking the impact away from the driver.”

Because the Lotus absorbed the majority of the damage, Andretti escaped the terrifying scene with only a few burns on his face.

Of course, those burns contain their own legend.

The photoshoot

After totalling the Lotus, Andretti and Co. pivoted to the Hawk. Despite getting only a day- and-a-half of practice with it, Andretti managed to qualify on the front row in between pole-sitter A.J. Foyt and Bobby Unser.

However, embarrassed by the burns on his face, Andretti enlisted the help of an impostor to fill in for him at the traditional front-row photo shoot — his twin brother, Aldo.

“I just remember that all of a sudden he came to us and said we’re going to put Aldo in the car,” McGee remembers. “He said he didn’t want to take photos when his face was like that.”

Mario Andretti said if anyone noticed, they didn’t say a word to him. He and his brother were twins, after all. They looked alike enough not to raise suspicion. No one asked him or his brother any questions that day or in the days to come.

“I don’t even think Foyt noticed,” Andretti laughed.

It wasn’t until the months and years that followed that word started to get out that Aldo was the one in the photo.

“As time went on,” Mario Andretti said, “I’d tell people, ‘Did you know that’s not me?’ They say, ‘No (expletive)?!’ ‘Yeah, it’s Aldo.’

“I’ve signed so many of those photos over the years. Even up to today. They still sell them at the Speedway gift shop (laughs).”

The Hawk

The truth, Andretti said? The truth is that the Hawk was never supposed to see the light of day at Indianapolis. The team only entered the car so they could enjoy a little extra garage space throughout the month.

“I had no idea what we had,” Andretti said when they rolled the Hawk out of the garage. I had no idea.”

What Andretti did know was that he’d won with the Hawk at Hanford a month earlier. However, at the first USAC race of the season in Phoenix, it lasted only 38 laps before exiting with a mechanical issues.

“It was not an auspicious beginning for that chassis, and now we have to run it in a 500-miler,” Andretti remembers. “We never even thought we were gonna do that. But we’re on this dance floor and we gotta dance, whether we like the music or not.”

Andretti put the car in the middle of the front row in qualifying but there was a problem. A big one. The Hawk was overheating. So for Carb Day, Brawner and McGee installed an external cooler they intended to use for the race.

The car barely made out on track that day before the protests began.

Foyt's team went crazy, recalled Steve Gruber, a "stooge" (independent contractor) hired by McGee to paint and letter the team's cars. The rules stated that because the external cooler wasn't on the car in qualifying, it shouldn't be allowed for the race. The configurations had to be the same.

Brawner and McGee came up with the inelegant solution of sticking a cooler behind the seat. It wasn't an ideal location aerodynamically, but they had no choice.

"That was a big job," McGee remembered. "We had to take the bottom of the car out. And remember, Carb Day was Friday, so we had Friday night, Saturday and Sunday morning to finish it up before the race. That was a heckuva scene."

It is a scene Gruber remembers well, as he was locked in the garage with Eddie Kuzma, the fabricator charged with installing the cooler.

"They locked Eddie and I in the garage the night before the race so that I could get my paintwork done and Eddie could do his fabrication work to get the cooler mounted," Gruber said. "He probably didn't finish until 3 or 4 in the morning before the race."

"It was bizarre because we didn't even have a chance to leak-check the car before the race. The only thing we could do was start the car up in the garage and make sure it didn't leak there. We really had no idea what to expect come race day."

The race

Andretti's problem wasn't pace. His problem was reliability. He had no idea whether the Hawk was going to survive 500 miles without overheating.

Early indications weren't good.

"They dropped the flag, and he took off like a shot," Gruber said. "He beat Foyt to the corner by, I don't know, six or eight car lengths."

"But by the time he came down the backstretch, I remember he said he looked down and all the temperatures gauges just went over to the right side of the gauge. And he's like 'Oh, man. Not again.' So he had to back off."

Much as Andretti was loathe to do it, slowing down helped. The temperatures dropped, but Andretti had to allow Roger McCluskey and Foyt to pass him and bide his time. Turned out he

wouldn't have to worry about them after all. Both drivers suffered mechanical issues early in the race and Andretti's lone concern became Lloyd Ruby.

Then, on Lap 105, Ruby fell out of the race when he had a problem in the pit. From there, as long as the car didn't overheat, the race was Andretti's. Andretti says now he was happy to have received some good fortune, but he's not sure he needed it.

"I felt I had the measure of AJ and Lloyd Ruby especially," Andretti said. "The only time they passed me is when I let them go. They never passed me competitively. I was only backing off because of my temperatures. At one point I thought to myself, 'I got to see if I can get them,' so I passed them. After that, I let them go again. So I knew I had the measure of them."

With his toughest competitors eliminated, Andretti put it on cruise control. The only thing he had left to fight was distraction and discomfort. Andretti later told McGee that mid-race, while driving down the backstretch, he could smell the food fans were cooking and got a little hungry himself.

Perhaps his mind had wandered toward a post-race snack when his car got up into the gray area coming out of Turn 2 and nearly hit the wall.

"That kind of got his attention," McGee laughed.

The only other issue facing Andretti was a little discomfort. The car was so hot, Andretti said.

"Because I was running 270-degree oil temperatures the whole race, I got these blisters on my back," Andretti said. "My whole back was burned. But I didn't really feel it. Not until later."

Not until well after setting the new 500 standard, by winning the race in three hours, 11 minutes and 14.71 second, nearly two minutes ahead of Dan Gurney.

Later, after the celebration in Victory Lane was over, McGee discovered that the gearbox inside the car was totally dry and the ball bearings "were ready to fall out."

"Honestly, I don't think I'd have finished another lap with that car," Andretti said. "It was that close. Really. It was just my day."

The kiss



[Andy Granatelli gives Mario Andretti a kiss after he won the 1969 Indy 500 \(Photo: Star archives\)](#)

Everyone knows the kiss. The image of Granatelli laying a big “wet” kiss on Andretti’s cheek in Victory Lane is iconic — among the most famous images in motorsports. It almost didn’t happen.

Andretti never had any interest in owning a team. Fifty years later, he still shudders at the idea, leaving that side of the sport to his son, Michael. Yet, in 1968, Andretti found himself as the unhappy team owner of Dean Van Lines.

When owner Al Dean died at the end of 1967, Andretti bought the team to keep the group together.

“But he hated being a car owner,” Gruber remembered. “He hated it. Every move he made in the car or out of the car, he was thinking, ‘What’s this going to cost me? He absolutely hated having that cloud hanging over his head.’”

Enter Granatelli.

Granatelli was known as a loud showman, a colorful entrepreneur who helped turn STP into a national brand.

“He knew how to promote,” McGee said. “What he did with STP brand-wise, it was right up there with Coca-Cola. He knew how to attract attention all his career. He was like PT Barnum.”

Granatelli also liked to build race cars, famously re-introducing the legendary Novi before bringing turbine-powered cars to IMS in 1967 and 1968, where he came heartbreaking close to

victory. While Andretti had been trying to win the 500 for five years, Granatelli and his brothers, Vince and Joe, had been trying since the 1940s.

Though they had their droughts in common, Andretti and Andy Granatelli were very different.

“Andy was Andy,” Andretti said. “You had to kind of put up with it. It was part of the deal with Andy. I didn’t particularly care for that part of it, but that was just his style.

“But for us, somehow there was a natural attraction there. I was never interested in what he was doing, because he only cared about Indianapolis. He never had a team to do the full season. And I wasn’t interested in that. I wanted to do the whole thing. But we always had a friendship type of thing. Something about being Italian,” Andretti said with a laugh.

Despite their differences, Andretti worked out a deal for Granatelli to buy the team, and the stage was set for the most famous kiss in motorsports.

As Andretti stood in Victory Lane with the wreath hanging around his neck and a smile spread wide across his face, Granatelli grabbed him, leaned in and delivered a big kiss on Andretti’s cheek.

“Heck no, I didn’t expect it,” Andretti said. “He just grabbed me. Mooah. Typical Andy. And it was a wet kiss (laughs). He must have forgot I had burns on my face.”

No, it didn’t hurt, Andretti said. How could it? He wasn’t feeling anything but joy in that moment.

“I knew it meant everything to him. That was a particular satisfaction that besides for myself, I just figured how sweet it is to do it for him and for Clint who had tried with Jimmy Bryan and Eddie Sachs and were close, but no cigar.

“Looking back, there was so much riding on that race. When you think about it now, when you’re reliving it, you almost getting the same gratitude now as you did back then.”

Follow IndyStar Motorsports Insider Jim Ayello on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook: @jimayello.

<https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/indy-500/2019/05/16/1969-indy-500-saga-mario-andrettis-unlikely-indy-500-victory/1168121001/>