

Mario Andretti's 1969 Indy 500 victory still cause for celebration 50 years later

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Race car driver Mario Andretti of Nazareth is greeted at his car with his trophy, his crew, and reporters after winning the Indianapolis 500 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1969. (FOCUS ON SPORT, GETTY IMAGES)

Mario Andretti was having no trouble winning races and championships while becoming the boy wonder of Indy-car racing more than a half century ago.

But after finishing third in the 1965 Indianapolis 500 to earn Rookie of the Year honors, the Italian immigrant, whose family settled in Nazareth 10 years earlier, hit a wall when it came to the most prestigious race in the world.

He started on the pole in 1966 but lasted just 27 laps before the engine (a valve) broke; he won a second pole in 1967, but on the 59th lap a wheel came off his race car and ended his day; and in 1968, he started second but was out after just two laps with a broken engine (piston).

The final results: 18th place in 1966, 30th in '67 and 33rd in '68.

“There’s only so much you can control, and in those days, the reliability factor was not there,” the 79-year-old Andretti said during a recent look back at his career at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. “Today, you don’t see blown engines, but our engines [in the 1960s] were like time bombs, and that was the problem.”

Things didn’t look a lot better in 1969, either. Especially when, just days prior to qualifying for the 53rd Indy 500, another of those uncontrollable situations – a broken hub – led to a wheel flying off his race car in practice. A horrific crash destroyed what had been the fastest car on the track that month.

Andretti escaped the wreck with only facial burns and told the late Ray Marquette of the Indianapolis Star, “As long as I can get out of something like this [crash] and be able to get into a race car the next day, I have to feel lucky ...”

“I very nearly got myself killed that day,” he reiterated recently.

As it turned out, the destruction of the unproven, British-built Lotus chassis may have been the best thing that happened for Andretti.

Co-chief mechanics Clint Brawner and Jim McGee along with Andretti made what Mario called “a collective decision” to pass up on two other Lotuses entered by car owner Andy Granatelli and pull out a more familiar Brawner Hawk chassis that Andretti had driven to a win earlier in the year but which was never intended to race at Indianapolis.

That choice turned what might have been another Indy disaster into an event about which Andretti now says “I get 10 times more attention for that 50 years later than I got when I actually won it.”

Andretti, with less than two full days of practice, drove that Ford-powered Hawk to second place in the 33-car Indy 500 qualifying field. He led 116 laps of the race itself, finished almost two laps in front of the field and drove to Victory Lane for a swig of milk and an Andy Granatelli kiss that has become an integral piece of Indianapolis 500 memory.

Andretti raced in 24 more Indianapolis 500s. He never won again. Yet, as open-wheel racing's biggest event is "Back Home Again in Indiana" for its 103rd running, Andretti is the Man of the Month.

"It's amazing how things are snowballing," Andretti said before leaving his home for a 50th anniversary celebration of his 1969 achievement.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum has a huge Andretti exhibit. The race program features an updated rendering of his winning car; the traditional silver and bronze badges that allow access to restricted areas of the speedway, feature him.



Marco Andretti's car honors the 50th anniversary of his grandfather Mario Andretti winning the Indy 500. (Joe Skibinski / Courtesy of IndyCar)

And, on the speedway's shop.ims.com website, you can find some 60 items ranging from a couple of postcards for \$1 to a clock for \$250. All Andretti all the time.

But not all the celebrating is being done in Indy.

During the week of the NTT IndyCar Series race at Long Beach last month, the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles was site of a display of his former race cars and a dinner that brought back Granatelli, Parnelli Jones and "the usual suspects I know ... a wonderful evening." The World of Speed Museum in Portland, Ore., is featuring an Andretti exhibit; the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame in Chicago is designating one of its highest honors awards as the Mario Andretti Lifetime Achievement Award.

Last Saturday, NBC-TV, which is carrying the Indy 500 this year for the first time, honored Andretti with a one-hour special, "Drive Like Andretti," which included glimpses of the Montona, Italy, home in which he grew up and the building that was once part of a refugee camp that was home to the Andrettis following World War II, to a look at his home in Nazareth.

"I'm humbled. I don't know what to say anymore," Andretti said. "It's amazing how just one event has been carried through all the years, and 50 years later, we are revisiting it."

Andretti, of course, who won the Daytona 500 in 1967, went on to add to his legend by winning four season-long titles in IndyCar in addition to winning a Formula One title. In all, the racing legend collected 111 career major circuit wins.

Actually, while he retired from Indy-car competition in 1994, he is still part of the "racing" segment of this month 25 years later.

He continues to be the primary driver of the two-seater Indy car in which he gives his passengers a 180-miles-per-hour thrill ride around the iconic speedway.

"We were looking at the schedule and figured that, barring rain, I'll be on the track 27 hours and 15 minutes this month," Andretti said. That will go right up to race day, when he and a celebrity rider will be in front of the field of 33 cars during the pace laps.

Andretti said "the beauty" of this special month is the fact that, for him, it is as much a family thing as it is an individual testimonial.

"We're still in it," he said, referring to his son, Michael, who has five cars entered in the 500, and his grandson Marco, whose race car is specially painted this year in a throw-back color reminiscent of the car in which Mario won in '69. The car is completely painted in what might have been known as an STP red.

"I have a lot riding out there, so it's not just that we're celebrating something that happened in the past. We're looking to celebrate in the future."

Marco's car usually has a livery recognizing major sponsor U.S. Concrete, whose Chairman and CEO, Bill Sandbrook, is a Nazareth native. Sandbrook's father, Dean, was a next-door neighbor of the Andrettis when they lived on what became known as Victory Lane after the 1969 victory. Michael Andretti is only a couple of years younger than Bill Sandbrook.

As for Marco carrying the retro-color, Mario said, "I hope I didn't jinx him. I hope it's a good omen for him.

"Wouldn't it be something if he won this one with so much going on? It's all good stuff."

To Mario, only one thing is missing.

His wife, Dee Ann, died last summer.

“I wish I had Dee Ann here so she could enjoy it with me,” Mario said. “There’s a big, big, big empty in my life. I don’t think Dee Ann ever realized how important she was to me every day. She had a dimension where she didn’t have to say much to fill the room and make me feel secure.”

He said that in the last few years of Dee Ann’s life, he had begun scaling back on some of his travel in order to spend more time with her. Now, he said, “I’m taking on more than normal. It’s best if I’m on the road ... lonely ... big house ... very empty at night.”

When asked how many times this month he might have to retell stories from 50 years ago, Andretti chuckled, then said, “I probably remember every minute of it. I remember the last thing I told Dee Ann before leaving for the track on race day. I said, ‘When I see you again, I’m going to be a champ or a chump.’”

Then he went out and became a champ.

For all time.

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For more on Andretti and the 500, read Reinhard’s blog at
www.ramblingsfromthebench.blogspot.com.

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