

Mario's Luckiest 500

Andretti reflects on Indy, 50 years after his only victory there.

By Mario Andretti, as told to Marshall Pruett
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Mario Andretti's name became so entwined with bad luck at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, it spawned a tongue-in-cheek noun: the Andretti Curse. In 1966, Andretti, 26 years old, was favored to win. He placed his car on pole, only to blow a cylinder after a few laps. The following year, his efforts were doused by a slipping clutch, and his race ended when his car lost a wheel. The year after, engine failure on lap one.

For a while, at the biggest race in the country, it seemed as if Mario couldn't do anything right. Then, 50 years ago, in a Brawner Hawk-Ford, he won his first and only 500. The triumph followed a crash in practice that destroyed his car and burned his face. But Andretti persevered, qualified on the front row, then dominated the race. Earlier this year, we sat down with him and a handful of images from 1969. Here's how Mario remembers his greatest day at the Brickyard.

The Failed Race Car That Let Mario Win



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Andretti and the Ford-powered Lotus 64. It was fast, but problematic, and ultimately withdrawn before qualifying.

"The original plan was ambitious. Since turbine-powered cars were regulated out of contention after 1968, [Lotus founder] Colin Chapman decided to employ the four-wheel-drive feature [from his 1968 turbine car], then just install a Ford engine. We

were suffering on the straights, but overall, we were quick, making up time in the corners. Ultimately, a hub sheared off, and I had a big crash. This car had some other issues—the gearbox was turned around, right behind the driver. It was undercooled and very hot. I don't know if the car would've made it 500 miles. The accident turned out to be a blessing."

Chatting With Chapman

Andretti and Chapman didn't win Indy together but did win the 1978 F1 championship.

"This photo was taken before the accident, since I don't have a burned face. Colin and I may have been talking Formula 1. He was so keen to get me in the four-wheel-drive car in Formula 1 that year. Which happened, in Germany. At the German Grand Prix, the Flugplatz corner is where you fly, where you go airborne. When the car landed there on the first lap, the left front wheel snapped off. Luckily, I didn't crash. I just wound up slowed on the road."



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Burns Weren't the Big Issue



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Mario's Lotus suffered a broken hub. A backup car suffered as well.

"I had so much puffiness from the burns in the qualifying crash, which caused trouble breathing during the race. As the week went on, it got worse. But my biggest concern was getting the spare car going, because we hadn't planned to race it. We tried hanging a big oil cooler behind the roll bar but removed it to qualify. Indy officials wouldn't let us put the cooler back on to race. The excess heat blistered my back. We had issues, big-time overheating issues, during the race. My concern was, 'Here we go—we're not gonna finish again.'"

Aero's Early Days



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Mario's intuition for aerodynamics would prove to be an asset throughout his career.

"We're happy in the photo, but the balaclava is covering my scars. Those wings were all my ideas to try. In those days, I began to see value in aerodynamics. The rules said wings had to be part of the body, so we used a piece of metal on the middle of the wing attached to the body."

Rivals Turned Friends



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They may have been opponents on the track, but drivers like Mario and Roger McCluskey (left) were closer than you think.

"There was good camaraderie among the drivers those days, because we weren't just driving. We were meeting every week in sprint cars, in Champ cars. Bouncing around the country, everywhere, and having hamburgers together, drinking beer together, all of that. It was flat out. My 1969 season, for instance, I did 37 races, in seven categories, 10 different race cars."

The Shock of Indy's Crowd



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An estimated 275,000 spectators filled Indy with roaring cheers in 1969.

"I remember my rookie year, in 1965. Indy's a huge event, and I'd never driven before a crowd like that. Going out on qualifying day, pulling out of the pits and looking at the crowd, I said, 'Holy crap! I'm the only one out there. I better not screw up.' It was amazing, suddenly, how daunting that was. Then, two seconds later, you forget all about it. But it's that kind of feeling, such a wonderful feeling, when you get so many people like that."

A Growing Spotlight



The 500 was broadcast on radio by 950 affiliates, even to troops in Vietnam.

"We were sharing the closed-circuit TV that day with a [boxing match]. What a day. Indianapolis was beginning to earn that level of attention. It was huge for the event itself and put huge stock in the driver winning. Fan mail was coming in from places across the world. Places I didn't think even had cars."

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What a Pit Stop Took in 1969



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Mario led 116 laps, but not without drama. A slow pit stop nearly derailed his race.

"In those days, you had to get a push because you only got a two-speed gearbox. We had one four-speed available but used a Halibrand two-speed at Indy to minimize weight behind the axle. You needed a push so you wouldn't stall the damn thing. We held a lot of fuel back then, so the plan was to change tires only twice the whole race. On the [first tire change], the mechanics couldn't get the right rear tire off. I just thought, I'm gone. But I was a competitor. I said, 'I'm not gonna give up my competitive position. I gotta manage this damn thing.' So I kept watching the tire in the mirror. We were vulnerable to puncture, but it worked."

Sweet Smell of...Garlic

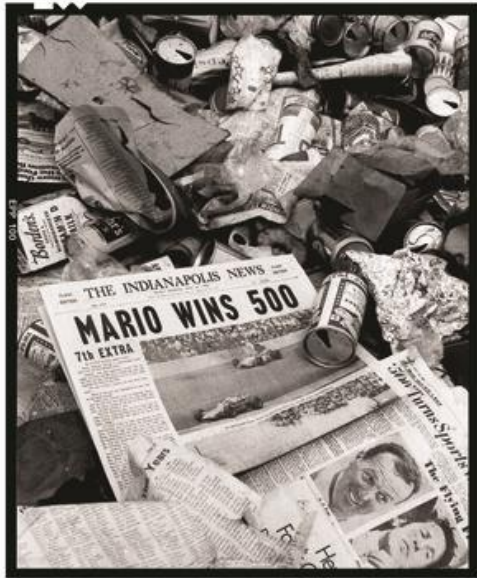


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Team owner Andy Granatelli laying one on Andretti. Who needs trophies?

"A happy moment. I remember that big kiss from Granatelli. I can still smell the garlic. I knew how much it meant to Andy, because he only cared about Indianapolis. For me, Indianapolis was the month of May, and then you move on. One of 37 races that year. But with Andy, it was everything. To be able to do it for him after all the glitches . . . immense satisfaction. It was such a premium to the joy, to know that win brought so much to them."

Victory Laps



Fans enjoyed a few cold ones.
The race wasn't too shabby
either.

"Somebody had some fun."

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