

Mario Andretti's Immense Respect for Niki Lauda

Though the two were fierce competitors, Mario Andretti has nothing but fond memories of his late friend.



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Niki Lauda, one of the most remarkable figures in the history of F1, died on Monday. To get a better insight into the man, we spoke with Mario Andretti, who raced against Lauda in F1 throughout the mid- to late-1970s.

"We lost a good one, I tell you," Andretti said yesterday, speaking from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where he'd spent the day giving two-seater rides. Andretti and Lauda were rivals on track, but they had a great relationship.

"I just always loved to have a conversation with him whenever we got together, whether it was just small talk, or talking about issues. He was a very interesting man," Andretti said. Lauda, along with Andretti and Jackie Stewart, was a big big proponent of advancing safety in

motorsports. These three drivers lobbied the FIA to create regulations to make cars and circuits safer.

"I don't think the sport would have really thrived as we came to the point of becoming more and more commercial if we kept up with the fatalities, that we were experiencing in the '60s, '70s and '80s," Andretti said. "He was very important in that aspect."



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Lauda had first-hand experience with danger. In 1976, he had a horrific crash at the Nürburgring. His car burst into flames, and he was trapped, suffering bad burns and inhaling toxic gasses, before fellow driver Arturo Merzario was able to pull him from the car. He was given his last rites in the hospital, but amazingly survived, and got back on track after missing just two races.

"Immediately he became a hero," Andretti said of Lauda's remarkable comeback. "I never thought anybody had the love that I had for driving. And then he was there fighting."

Andretti's respect for him grew even further when, at the 1976 Japanese Grand Prix, Lauda retired after just two laps. The Austrian driver pulled in because he was struggling to blink as a result of his injuries, and couldn't see through the thick rain. Retiring from the race led to him losing the world title to James Hunt by a point, but he wasn't about to risk his life to do so. "He was an intelligent dude," Andretti said.

And a good dude to race against. "The thing about him, he was always correct," Andretti said. "If you cut him off, did something like that, you felt guilty. He'd never do that to you.

"You could run wheel to wheel, 'til the cows came home. He will not do you wrong."



Lauda (left) and Andretti (right) racing at the 1977 Grand Prix of the Netherlands.
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Andretti stopped racing Formula 1 full time in 1981, and Lauda retired from racing entirely in 1985, but the two kept in touch. "People like that, you're forever friends because you have that respect, you know? I always respected him immensely."

Lauda was also Andretti's ear on the ground in F1. "I always looked forward to talking to him and catching up, and then getting his view on things, what's going on at the moment, and getting the straight scoop," Andretti said. "Whatever he said, you could bank on it.

"He wouldn't pull any punches. If he had to criticize, he would criticize... It was interesting to get his take on things, and I'll tell you, for the most part, we always agreed."

Andretti praised Lauda's wisdom in coaxing Lewis Hamilton to join Mercedes, a decision that's paid off in the form of four world titles for the Brit. "I thought 'what the hell is Lewis thinking, you know?' But, Niki knew what he was getting him into, and I think Lewis will thank him forever."

Like many in the motorsports world, Lauda's death has been tough on Andretti. "Things will never be the same when people like that are gone," he said.



Mario Andretti Twitter

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