

# Insider: Marco Andretti's Indy 500 pole win takes Mario Andretti on emotional ride

[Nathan Brown](#)

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INDIANAPOLIS — You would have thought Mario Andretti had just stepped out of the car himself, amped up with endless energy, yet nearly speechless.

The voice of the always-talkative 80-year-old patriarch of racing's most famous family was at a different pitch, his excitement for his grandson seeping through the phone all the way from the family's lake house. A place normally meant for relaxation was, instead, an escape for the former driver who raced 29 times at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and came away with one win, three poles and loads of disappointment.



With Marco Andretti flashing the most consistent top-end speed all week long and positioned with the final qualifying run Sunday during the Fast Nine Shootout, his grandfather was already more than proud.

But nervous too.

“There’s nothing you can do, except hope and pray,” he told IndyStar after the younger Andretti clinched the pole for next week’s Indy 500. “I’d never been so nervous in my entire life, but there was never anything more rewarding than today, to see Marco do his thing and the way he did it. I felt so helpless. But now, I’m so proud.

“He’s got the talent beyond what his record says, and he showed something today we all knew was always there, but he had to show it. I think this is a big turnaround for him in his career, I really do.”

IMS had always been a bittersweet second home for the Andretti family the last half-decade. After Mario’s back-to-back poles in 1966-67, he emerged victorious in 1969 to spark the third of his four series championships. Five more times, the elder Andretti would start on the front row for the Greatest Spectacle in Racing, but never again would his famous grin land on the side of the Borg-Warner trophy.

And his son would bring no solace. For all he achieved in his illustrious auto-racing career, Michael Andretti never hopped out of the car in Victory Lane at IMS. And he never started on the inside of Row 1 either. Since 1987, the year Mario led 170 of the first 177 laps after starting on pole, only for his engine to fail him, no one from the Andretti family had taken home the P1 award the Sunday before the biggest race in the world.

Until Sunday, when the man who nearly won it all as a teenager, and whose career has been mired in mediocrity ever since, pulled off the almost unthinkable. IndyCar’s 2020 it-man Scott Dixon, who won the first three races of the year and holds a commanding lead entering this year’s Indy 500, threw down two laps in the 231s and comfortably sat atop the leaderboard as Andretti prepared for his run Sunday afternoon.

So when the three other Andretti drivers could hardly sniff Dixon’s four-lap run Sunday, it was hard to imagine how the driver who hadn’t started on the front row at IMS since 2013 would have what it took to fend off the Ice Man.

Andretti said his confidence came from a call with his grandfather not long before he hopped in the car Sunday morning.

“He said, ‘The wind will scare you, but it won’t ever crash you,’ and today, he was right,” the younger Andretti said as he stepped out the cockpit Sunday. “It was all good advice. ‘Let them beat you, don’t dial yourself out. You already know what you’ve got. Do it again and let them dial themselves out chasing you.’”

His grandfather elaborated: “I told him ‘Don’t make any changes (because of the wind).’ And I think it’s one of the first times ever I would have done exactly the same thing they did.”

It’s not often the elder Andretti gets his way. His driver grandson joked Friday, ahead of turning the fastest lap at IMS since 1996, that he was going to get yelled at either way with the extra boost injected into his No. 98 Honda.

“Today, I get yelled at either way. If I get a tow and not a clean run, (team co-owner Bryan Herta) and my engineer (Garrett Mothersead) are mad. If I don’t get a tow/put up a big lap, (Mario Andretti) gets mad.”

But the energy that the 1969 Indy 500 still elicits stems from his own passion for his grandson and the place that truly put the elder Andretti on the map. He knows just what winning there can do for a career, the doubters it can silence and the legacy a sip of milk in Victory Lane can create.

And that’s all he’s ever wanted for his grandson – a driver he sees so much of himself in.

“He’s got commitment, and that’s all that’s ever mattered to us,” Mario said. “As a family, we all pull for one another, and we’re so proud of him. We realize how rewarding all these events are, and that’s what you strive for, what you work hard for. That’s what you take all the risk for, and when the rewards come to you, everything up to this point was worthwhile. Once you taste that, man, you want more. That’s the beauty of it.

“Marco, he needed to taste this, and you know for sure he can get it done. Even though he knew before this time, he proved it, and I guarantee you his confidence and everything is going to bring his driving up a couple notches. That’s what he needs, and that’s beautiful.”

Since that close-call in 2006, his rookie debut in the Indy 500, the youngest Andretti has won just twice – later that season at Sonoma and in 2011 at Iowa. Since the start of the 2016 season, he’s claimed just two top-five finishes and hasn’t stood on the podium once. But as his grandfather says, these performances he’s put on display since rolling on the track Wednesday are what his teammates, his crew, his father and grandfather all knew were still possible.

But opportunities like Sunday don’t come around often. It’s why Marco wasn’t just disappointed, but angry, immediately following that last-second pass from Sam Hornish Jr. in the final couple yards of the 200th lap in 2006.

“I knew when I lost the 500, you saw me mad cause I knew it was possible I’d be talking to you guys in 15 years without having won one yet,” he said. “That’s why I was so mad.

“And when you have struggles, it makes it all worth it when you have days like today. It’s been brutal. I’m a competitor, and I don’t want to not win races and get podiums. We’re just not wired to not win.”

For all the close calls, faultless crashes and mechanical failures he’s suffered during his roller-coaster 15-year IndyCar career, it’s only fitting Andretti gets to savor this one a little bit longer. His grandfather said it’s the best thing about sitting on pole at IMS: “You have a whole week to savor it, and I love that for him.”

It’s what gave Mario all the confidence in the world entering that 1987 Indy 500 – the last time an Andretti started out front here. Now, he said, the whole family gets a week-long boost, as they

sit and wait to see if the dreaded “Andretti Curse” might be ousted with a run off the front next Sunday.

Coming into this week, given Andretti Autosport’s host of issues throughout the team in 2020, including from its namesake driver, few would have thought this would have been the year and this the driver.

But 14 years ago, the youngest Andretti nearly shocked the world. If he finds a way to take the checkered flag in a week, there’s no telling what his grandfather might do.

“If there’s a 15-foot ceiling, I’m going to hit it when I jump,” he said. "Today, that was just fabulous, fantastic. I don’t know what else to say. I just jumped out of my skin, and I’m trying to get back in it.

“That’s my grandson out there, and he has a shot.”

*Email IndyStar motor sports reporter Nathan Brown at [nlbrown@gannett.com](mailto:nlbrown@gannett.com). Follow him on Twitter: @By\_NathanBrown.*

[https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/2020/08/16/indy-500-marco-andrettis-pole-win-takes-mario-andretti-emotional-ride/5534940002/?for-guid=51658b42-b5f3-4c91-890c-7fa53bd45cda&utm\\_source=indystar-IndyStar%20Motor%20Sports&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=baseline&utm\\_term=list\\_article\\_thumb](https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/motor/2020/08/16/indy-500-marco-andrettis-pole-win-takes-mario-andretti-emotional-ride/5534940002/?for-guid=51658b42-b5f3-4c91-890c-7fa53bd45cda&utm_source=indystar-IndyStar%20Motor%20Sports&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=baseline&utm_term=list_article_thumb)