

OFF TO THE RACES

Mario Andretti and the U.S. Grand Prix: A match made for Formula 1 success

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CULTURE MAP | AUSTIN

06.09.12 | 06:00 pm

Circuit of the Americas founder and chairman Bobby Epstein sat in the passenger seat of his own vehicle Thursday morning — holding his breath — as [Mario Andretti](#), yes, *that* Mario Andretti, took the wheel of his Cadillac Escalade.

Andretti, perhaps the greatest racecar driver in motor sports history, couldn't help himself. The Austin Formula 1 circuit's Turns 1 through 9 are paved and Andretti was ready to get the feel of the track.

"The guys trying to follow us tell me he managed to keep 3 wheels on the track at all times," said a nervous but ecstatic Epstein as he got out of the truck. "He set the first track record."

"You've got a little bit of understeer," said Andretti smiling.

"This is a world class facility, a showcase. It competes with the classics in Europe and it will provide stability that does not currently exist for Formula 1 in this country."

— Mario Andretti

"Seriously, I am overwhelmed with what I see here," he added. "It's something we will all be proud of. You will have no competition in the United States, and you are keeping up with Texas reputation. Nothing here is small or dainty."

On Saturday morning, [Circuit of the Americas](#) announced Mario Andretti would serve as a spokesman and ambassador for the [United States Grand Prix](#) and the Circuit of the Americas.

"This is a world class facility, a showcase," explained Andretti. "It competes with the classics in Europe and it will provide stability that does not currently exist for [Formula 1](#) in this country."

If there is royalty in motor sports, it descends from the lineage of Andretti. Today, Marco Andretti drives Indy cars, while his dad Michael Andretti is one of the most successful team owners in Indy car racing. But neither of those boys, despite the pride he might have in them, approaches the greatness of Marco's grandfather, Mario Andretti.

Andretti defined the macho, hard-core racecar driver. Along with his contemporaries, A.J. Foyt and Richard Petty, Andretti took auto racing from the back lot to prime time.



Courtesy of COTA

Mario Andretti on the COTA straightaway

On Friday, he came to town, checking out the track for the first time. CultureMap was invited along for the ride, and for three hours listened and absorbed every word the driver's driver had to say.

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“We are so proud to have you with us,” exclaimed COTA investor Red McCombs as he shook Andretti’s hand before sitting down for a barbecue lunch in the track’s construction office. “To have you endorse us and put your name on this... we’re delighted. We set out to do something special. You bring us credibility.”

It took six months of analysis before Andretti decided to take the job and make no mistake, this is not just some play for a big name promoter. Mario Andretti doesn’t need the money, and he certainly is busy enough working with his son’s team, his winery, his endorsements and mentoring his grandson.

No, Andretti took the job because he believes the U.S. Grand Prix will finally bring Formula 1 fully into the mix of American sports.

“Formula 1 is, in every other country except the United States, the Super Bowl of that country. Here you have much more competition. And the fact that we didn’t have a lot of stability here since the Watkins Glen days... they were popular but they didn’t have longevity.”

Andretti believes COTA, and the U.S. Grand Prix are just what Formula 1 needs to succeed in the U.S.

“There is stability in this track, and this track is already one of the elite tracks in the world,” he explained.

Andretti is arguably the greatest driver in motor sports history. He is the only driver to win the Indy 500, the Daytona 500 and the Formula 1 World Championship. He won the IROC Championship and the Formula 1 World championship in the same year. In fact, no American has won a Formula 1 race since Andretti did it in 1978. He was named Driver of the Century by the Associated Press in 1999.

“I wanted to race,” he said. “If there was an open weekend on the schedule, I went looking for a race. I would do [Formula 1] trials in Brazil then fly up to the U.S. to race over the weekend and then back to Brazil.”

“The theater is here, and all the players will want to be here.”

He is also the right man for the big job of promoting Formula 1 to a U.S. audience.

At 72, Mario Andretti is in spectacular shape — trim and lean. He’s a soft-spoken, kind man who often deferred to his hosts and his interviewer. He deferred because he is kind, but the knowledge of racing he is willing to share is amazing. His experience as a driver in all three major race circuits, Indy car, Nascar, and Formula 1, give him unparalleled perspective.

He praised the COTA track design. “I love a long lap.” he said. “Generally laps are like two and a half [miles], but three plus [COTA is 3.4 miles] to me, from a driver’s standpoint, has got a different challenge. You’re part of the elite when you’re in that area.”



Courtesy of COTA

Circuit of the Americas founder and chairman Bobby Epstein, Mario Andretti, Executive Vice-President Bruce Knox at COTA turn 1.

And he raved about the iconic Turn 1. “That’s my turn. There’s something about that turn. There’s a very fast approach to it obviously, but because it has a hill to it, it’s going to have a sense of security

where it's going to invite good dive-bombing for passing. Overtaking is something everybody enjoys and everybody looks forward to, drivers, fans, that's what it's all about."

Mario Andretti is just what COTA needs. Bringing him on board was a brilliant move by an ownership group that seems to finally be running on all cylinders as they put lawsuits behind them and as ticket sales begin Sunday.

"The theater is here," Andretti said, "and all the players will want to be here."

"Let me know when you finish paving that course," he added, "I'm ready to start testing it. I wish I was actively racing myself."

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