

FORMULA 1

# Mario Andretti on Austin's Formula 1 circuit, America's interest and why he's no spectator

BY KEVIN BENZ

CULTURE MAP AUSTIN

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Mario Andretti races. He races everything. It's been said he'd race a chicken if it had a steering wheel.

Even at 72-years-old, he still looks every bit the handsome, lean superstar he ever was. He is an icon of motor sports and still the only person to win the Indy 500, the Daytona 500 and the Formula 1 World Championship. Moreover, Andretti won the Formula 1 Championship, the Indy 500 and the IROC Championship in the same season.

Such accolades make him arguably the greatest race car driver in history.

Last week, Andretti agreed to serve as the official ambassador for Austin's [Circuit of the Americas](#) (COTA) and the United States Grand Prix (USGP). There couldn't be a better choice; Andretti won 12 F1 races in his career and took 18 poles. He is the last American to win a Formula 1 Grand Prix. That was back in 1972.

While visiting Austin before the announcement, Andretti sat down with CultureMap for a wide-ranging conversation about the Formula 1 circuit, America's apparent disinterest in the world's highest level of racing and what he is working on now.

**CultureMap: You drove the track — knowing Formula 1 tracks as you do, what do you think will make this track stand out for the drivers?**

**Mario Andretti:** I can't really tell you how it feels after driving it in a Cadillac Escalade, but I know it's going to be good. Looking at the layout, there are things that I recognize, and I can hardly wait to get in there and get in the rhythm of things.

I always like as much diversion on a road course — elevation points and such. From the driver's standpoint, the big challenge is the blind corners because you have to envision what's on the other side. The guy that doesn't — the guy that hesitates — creates time lost, and then you have time gained.

On this track... I love a long lap. General laps are like two and a half [miles] — three, three plus, to me, from a driver's standpoint has got a different challenge. You're part of the elite when you're in that area.

Many of the features of the track are features these drivers will recognize because they're copied from other classic venues around the world. And that's going to be useful even in the set-ups, because if you have data based on [Hochenheim](#), if you have data based on [Silverstone](#) or whatever, some of that will apply — so everybody will welcome that.

[In Austin] it's a level playing field. Everybody starts from zero as far as learning. It's always whoever grasps the situation the quickest. They will obviously have the advantage, and today there is so much simulation you can do, it prepares you very well.

Once you really start getting into the race, you learn the nuances of the track pretty quick by having a couple of "uh-oh" moments and then you correct it. A driver competitively will do 10 laps and then the second stint, three or four laps — and then you're in, you're there.

**CM: You looked at Turn 1, the iconic turn for this track...**

**MA:** That's my turn...

**CM: That's your turn? The Andretti turn?**

**MA:** 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. I liked that immediately when I got here. I don't know another track that has that. The closest one is Austria, but the right-hander there was flat, so you didn't really brake hard.

**CM: What was your favorite Formula 1 track? Which did you really look forward to driving?**

**MA:** Many, especially the ones I won on [laughs]. People ask me, "What was your favorite car?" The answer's the same: Every one I won a race with.

I don't have just one favorite. I never wanted to go to a venue or a race and say, "Oh crap, I hate this place." If you go in like that, you're done. I just thought, you know, I'm looking forward to all of it.

Deep down, some you enjoy more than others, but your mindset has to be the same. If you are really realistic in this game, you won't win a lot.

**CM: What do you mean by that?**

**MA:** Because there are many times when you just don't have — going in — a realistic chance of winning. But so many things can happen around you that if you do your best and you're still in there — in play — you'll get the opportunity. But if you go in there saying, "No way in hell I can win today," then you're done. You might as well pack up and go home.

So you have to maintain that positive mindset that "I still can win today."

**CM: Why has Formula 1 not managed to capture the imagination of American race fans?**

**MA:** The United States has more to offer at the top level of motor sports than any other country in the world. There's no other country in the world where you can have a brilliant, totally accomplished career with any of the other series they have.

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

There's nothing like having a solid base and a home. I thought Indy would have that, but where Indy was falling short was in ambience — which, believe me, really plays.

I've never seen a dual-purpose facility really prosper. Daytona too, it's an oval, fine, but the road course — you race at Le Mans you get 300,000 people, you race at Sebring you get 200,000 people, at Daytona you've got 12 people. You've got the best and all the great hotels and all that, but the track, there's something missing.

That's why Formula 1 didn't prosper at Indy, because it was playing second fiddle to the 500 and the Brickyard and the course was not good. Tony George [former President and CEO of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway] was going to lengthen the track and go under the short shoot between turns 3 and 4, and go out on the golf course on the other side, and then go back, which would have given it some character — you'd have an elevation change and a tunnel and all that — but none of that happened.

Formula 1 lost stability and now they're looking to get it back. And you have New York, it's a temporary track — it's a circus. The tent either goes up or it doesn't.

Here [Circuit of the Americas] you have a base. There's no place in the United States that can compete with [Austin's track]. You've got your own Taj Mahal, and you can go up against any venue in the world and shine. The U.S. deserves this type of class circuit and not only deserves it, it's expected.

You'll see that the international media is critical, but they're fair, and they have a lot of good comparisons to go by. And you'll come away with flying colors here, I have no about it.

**CM: Why are there so few American drivers in Formula 1?**

**MA:** It's because you can have a brilliant career in stock cars, you can have a brilliant career in Indy cars.

**CM: So why aren't there more like you today?**

**MA:** I was born and raised in Italy. As a kid I was in a refugee camp. We were affected by the war; the family didn't have a car, but I was dreaming about being a race driver.

I saw my very first race at Monza in 1954. I was 14 years of age, and I started dreaming about Formula 1. That was really in my veins. And when I came here, everything I did was trying somehow — I was going to have a stint in Formula 1. That was my objective.

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I could have just had a career here, I was fine, but I had that on my bucket list and I wasn't going to be satisfied without Formula 1.

Some of the young drivers that are born here, they may not have that desire, they may be happy doing NASCAR.

**CM: Is it too specialized today to drive multiple auto-racing series?**

**MA:** It was always specialized. How many drivers really did that? Not too many. Would you ask Richard Petty to do Formula 1 or Jackie Stewart to race stock cars?

It's not that times have changed; it's up to the individual. How much work do you need to be satisfied? Ask my wife, she never had a picnic because I never had any weekends off. Poor thing but she was so supportive, and that's what gave me the freedom and serenity to just go and do it, because that's all I wanted.

If my regular schedule had 20-21 races [each year], I would be doing 40-45, because if I had a weekend off when I was doing Formula 1, I was going from Argentina to Duquesne, Illinois, one weekend after another. Even when I won the championship, I won 4 Indy car races, and I won the IROC championship the same year.

Does everybody want that? No. Is that wrong? No. It's an individual preference.

**CM: How involved are you still with racing? Do you still go to a lot of races?**

**MA:** My direct involvement is with Izod and Honda. The other part of it is my son [Michael Andretti]; he's a team owner, and my interest there is my grandson [Marco Andretti] who is a driver.

I get to about seven or eight races a year, but it's so tough. I'm trying to prioritize my time, but motor racing is still front and center for me and always will be.

I'm a passionate fan of the sport — it's been my life, it's all I ever wanted to do. That's why I like to think I have skin in the game with the family involved.

Everything I do outside of the sport also has a connection with it. Companies I work with, as I said earlier to Mr. McCombs [a COTA partner], I have to enjoy what I'm doing. I like to stay busy, but I have to like what I'm doing.

I get to Daytona sporadically. Indy's a natural, and I'm involved quite a bit in activities there. You will not see me at a venue just as a spectator — never. I have to have a sense of purpose to be there, a business reason.

If you see me at a Formula 1 race, I have a business reason to be there, otherwise I'll watch it on TV. I'm a fan, but I'm not a spectator. I've been in it, in the middle of it, and nothing can equal that — so I'm not going to just stand out there and watch.