

Leaders & Success

Auto Racer Mario Andretti Dreamed Big And Charged Hard

By [SONJA CARBERRY](#), FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY Posted 01:29 PM ET 4/20/12

As a race car driver, Mario Andretti was inexhaustible.

"I was never getting enough," he told IBD. "I felt there weren't enough races. If I had a weekend off, I would book something else."

Talk about an adrenaline-fueled schedule.



Andretti uniquely captured the trio of the Daytona 500, Indianapolis 500 and Formula One world title. AFP/Getty Images

Days after finessing his Formula One car around the 2.6-mile track in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he'd duel on dirt at a sprint car race in Du Quoin, Ill.

Each event offered a different spin on competition, new insights into driving and the all-important checkered flag.

"I wasn't gallivanting to other disciplines just to be there," he said. "I wanted to win. Then, mission accomplished."

Such hot pursuit yielded versatility.

Sweep

Andretti's Keys

- Auto racing champion.

- Overcame: Being a WWII refugee and starting from zero in America.
- Lesson: Harness your drive, grab each opportunity and learn at every turn.
- "I value individuals who are goal-oriented. You have to formulate something you want to achieve. Then it's all about perseverance."

Andretti is the only driver to clinch this trio: Daytona 500 winner (1967), Indianapolis 500 victor (1969) and Formula One world champion (1978).

Add longevity — Andretti's professional career spanned 31 years — and the honors pile up:

Four-time IndyCar champion ('65, '66, '69, '84).

Three-time 12 Hours of Sebring winner ('67, '70, '72).

USAC National Dirt Track champion ('74).

International Race of Champions titlist ('79).

Pikes Peak Hill Climb winner ('69).

The only racer named Driver of the Year in three decades ('69, '78, '84), Andretti was also dubbed Driver of the Century in 1999 by the Associated Press.

How to triumph? "Mario has told me in the past that desire is the big separator between the champions and the also-rans," said Derek Daly, Formula One driver and "Race to Win" author.

Added Daly: "This desire, along with his fully developed skills, allowed him to be competitive for longer than any other driver."

Andretti, 72, kept his foot to the pedal to the end of his racing run.

During his final IndyCar season — 1994's "Arrivederci, Mario" tour — he scored his 100th major career victory in Phoenix at age 53.

Then he set a fastest-in-the-world closed-course speed of 234.275 mph during qualifying at Michigan International Speedway.

"Intensity comes with the desire, the desire to achieve," he said.

Hardly born with a silver stick shift in hand, Andretti hit every mile marker between the shoestring competitor and champagne-soaked legend.

War And On The Move

Born in 1940 in Montona, Italy — now part of Croatia — Andretti had a childhood that included Nazis taking over his grandmother's hotel and a grenade lobbed into the yard where he played with twin brother Aldo.

The end of World War II in 1945 brought both relief and loss.

Redrawn borders made the Andretti homestead part of communist Yugoslavia.

His father, Gigi, fled with his wife, Rina, and their three children to displaced persons camps in Udine and Lucca, Italy.

Conditions were dire those seven years, but Mario and Aldo dreamed big in their shared top bunk.

One day they'd be hotshot drivers. People would say: "There go the famous Andrettis."

Famous like Alberto Ascari, the cool and lightning-quick Italian racer Mario idolized.

"I knew what I wanted early on in life," Andretti said. "I had no idea how to go about it."

So he started where he was.

Steering Up

The 13-year-olds talked a local garage owner into letting them park cars, sneaked joy rides on a family friend's scooter and schemed how they'd break into big-time racing.

Then another spin. The Andretti family was moving to America — an ocean away from the road courses they intended to conquer.

Within days of arriving at an uncle's house in Nazareth, Pa., the 15-year-olds found their future — a nearby, half-mile dirt oval.

The track and cars were foreign, but the speed translated just fine.

First things first — the boys hustled to master English and catch up in school. When a strict principal insisted on holding them back, Mario took the GED route.

"I went after correspondence courses as I do everything else — flat out," Andretti wrote in the 1970 autobiography, "What's It Like Out There?"

His tutor, Dee Ann Hoch, became his wife of 50 years — "the best contract I ever signed," Andretti wrote.

The way negatives could turn positive made Andretti an optimist. Lesson learned: Always look for the bright side.

The boys might not have money, but they had resources.

To buy their first race car — a 1948 Hudson Hornet — the duo sold shares to friends for \$5 to \$20.

"Right from the start, I looked at racing as a business," Andretti wrote.

Driving, on the other hand, was an anything-goes affair.

"We just revved it up and stood on it — and who cares about anybody or anything that got in our way," Andretti wrote of his and Aldo's racing debut in March 1959.

Within months, they experienced the sport's hardest knock.

Mario watched trackside, helpless, as an end-over-end crash put Aldo in a two-week coma. He'd recover and race again before retiring in 1969.

But in the moment, their father turned his anger on Mario. The Andretti patriarch envisioned his sons going into business, just not a dangerous one.

"Initially I had to go against his wishes because I believed in what I was doing," Mario said.

To make good on his big-time dreams, the young driver needed to get noticed.

With a loan from his father-in-law, Andretti shifted into three-quarter midget racing.

The open wheelers ran all winter at indoor tracks, which meant more time in the driver's seat, more chances to win and all-important exposure; big-time team owners and sponsors spent the cold months watching arena races.

"That was another plus — a chance to be seen by the right people," he wrote.

Four victories and 24 top-10 finishes in 1962 turned the heads of car owners Bill and Eddie Mataka, who asked Andretti to drive their midget car the following summer.

Given an opening, he roared through — and rose through the ranks of sprint cars, stock cars, the IndyCar circuit and Formula One.

His first F1 race — the 1968 season opener at Watkins Glen, N.Y. — exemplified the driver's intensity and ability, noted "Mario Andretti" biographer Gordon Kirby.

For qualifying, car owner Colin Chapman pushed Andretti to run on treaded tires. The rookie insisted slicker rubber would get him through the high-speed corners quicker. "It's really all about engineering, dialing in your car to suit you better," Kirby told IBD. "It's almost a poetic thing. Mario, he understands that."

Andretti held firm to his strategy and earned the pole position, only to be knocked off when Scottish phenom Jackie Stewart turned in a faster lap.

Chapman was satisfied with a second-place start, but the F1 rookie wouldn't have it. After a heated exchange, Andretti screeched back onto the track for another go, besting Stewart's time by 0.07 second.

The one-upmanship was stunning to many, but not to Stewart, who told AutoWeek, "I knew bloody well he can drive any kind of race car and do it splendidly."

Stewart went on to win the main event; a broken clutch ended Andretti's day on lap 35.

Mastering each set of wheels required a quick mind — Andretti eagerly absorbed technology — and ability to collaborate with his crew.

The Andretti-inspired lesson Derek Daly impresses on his son, Conor, an up-and-coming driver:

Bring back information every time you pull into the pit lane.

"This is what will emulate Mario more than any other skill, as he was a gifted development driver who could set up a car to be faster probably better than most of his competitors," Daly said.

Still In The Fast Lane

Andretti continues to set a swift pace.

Since he retired from racing, his business interests include the award-winning Andretti Winery in California's Napa Valley, a petroleum firm and a driving school.

Andretti also maintains spokesman and consulting relationships with Firestone, GoDaddy, MagnaFlow and **Mattel's** ([MAT](#)) Hot Wheels.

For Andretti, life is one long pursuit: "It's all about passion, believing in something and wanting something."

<http://news.investors.com/article/608548/201204201329/desire-drove-record-setting-racer-mario-andretti.htm?p=full>