

There Was No MarioMania At Daytona In '67

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Mario Andretti was welcomed to Victory Lane at Daytona, but not into the garages. (Photo by RacingOne/Getty Images)

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In an era in which the entire sport of NASCAR seems to roll out the red carpet, so to speak, for cross-over open-wheel drivers like Danica Patrick and Juan Pablo Montoya, it's hard to imagine that it wasn't always that way.

Among the career accomplishments of the great Mario Andretti is a win in the 1967 Daytona 500, a win that makes him the only driver to win the Daytona 500, the Indianapolis 500, which he won in 1969, and a Formula One championship, in 1978.

It also gave him wins in Formula One, IndyCar, World Sportscar Championship and NASCAR. Only two drivers, Andretti and Dan Gurney, have ever done that.

But, according to Andretti, he got no DanicaMania-like treatment during Speedweeks of 1967.

Andretti said in a recent interview that got his chance to drive at Daytona because in 1967 he was a part of Ford Motor Company's motorsports team.

"I was basically a Ford driver in Indy car," he said. "I had Ford engines."

Andretti also drove sports cars for Ford at Le Mans, Daytona and Sebring, where he won the 12 Hours of Sebring with co-driver Bruce McLaren just weeks after his Daytona win.

For the Daytona 500, Andretti, then just 26 years old, was assigned to the powerful Holman-Moody team, where he would be a teammate to one of the sport's top stars, Fred Lorenzen.

"Obviously it was a good team," Andretti said. "The best part was Ralph Moody [a team co-owner] took my project on himself."

Moody chose the crafty crew chief Jake Elder to prepare Andretti's No. 11 Ford.

"Out of the gate my car was handling very nicely," Andretti recalled. "I really liked it, but we didn't have a good motor. They were not giving me the best motors. I was not going for points."

After qualifying, Andretti began to turn the heat up on his team to give him a better engine.

"I started making noise, and they finally gave me a decent motor," he said. "I was seeing revs I hadn't seen before. I was scuffing tires faster than Curtis Turner ran to win the pole."

From that point on, Andretti felt good about his chances in the 500.

Andretti started the 500 from 12th place, and took the lead for the first time on Lap 23.

While some in the field that day were satisfied to run in the draft and save their equipment for the finish, Andretti wanted to be out front, in large part because he was racing with a shorter rear spoiler than he would have liked.

"In those days you had to race with the spoiler you qualified with," he said. "Because I had such a weak motor I had a lower spoiler, and I had to race with it."

“I confused these guys a little bit. Early on in the race nobody was really aggressive, they weren’t wanting to go for the lead, but I had to go for the lead because I was way too loose when I was following other cars.

“They said: ‘OK kid, you go.’”

Andretti was leading late in the race when he and Lorenzen made their final stops for fuel. At that point, the two Ford drivers were the only ones on the lead lap, and with none of today’s lucky dog free pass or wave-around rules in place, it was unlikely that any competitor could overtake them.

Andretti’s pit stop was slow, allowing Lorenzen to take the lead. Andretti maintains to this day that the delay on his stop was intentional as the Ford executives at the track wanted Lorenzen, a NASCAR regular, to win the sport’s biggest race.

“They held me back for at least seven seconds,” Andretti said. “They wanted him to win.”

Whatever the case, the bottom line was that Andretti left pit road a mad, motivated driver.

“I hunted him down,” Andretti said of Lorenzen. “I didn’t blame him. I was just faster. I passed him, but he hung on to me really hard. I couldn’t shake him.”

But in that era of racing and the way the draft worked with those cars, the driver running out front usually was a sitting duck at the finish.

Then, as the lead duo came up to lap the Ford of Tiny Lund, Andretti pulled a surprise move.

“Tiny motioned me to go to the right, and pulled to the center of the backstretch,” Andretti said. “I all of a sudden went to the left, and I confused Freddie. He couldn’t figure out what had happened.

“When I came out on the other side of Tiny, I broke the draft and Freddie never could catch me.”

Andretti built a 22-second lead before Richard Petty blew an engine and the final two laps were run under caution.

“It worked out for me,” Andretti said. “Once I broke the draft he couldn’t catch me.”

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