

## We signed the waiver and rode with Mario Andretti at Pocono

Just like the commercial showed, getting in an IndyCar with Mario Andretti can be a thrill of a lifetime.



The Morning Call's Keith Groller (back) gets strapped into a two-seat Indy Car with Mario Andretti at Pocono Raceway on Saturday. (KEVIN MINGORA, THE MORNING CALL)

July 09, 2013 | Keith Groller  
ALLENTOWN (PA) | THE MORNING CALL

From the singing and wisecracking Flo on the Progressive spots to those annoying strummers who pop up at the end of the Geico "Happier Than ..." commercials, I try to ignore advertising when watching TV.

But when you have a local icon like Mario Andretti involved in a spot, you stop and watch it.

During the Indy 500 this year, I saw his commercial for Honda's "Fastest Seat in Sport" sweepstakes. It made me laugh.

It begins with Mario and his "lucky" passenger putting on their helmets as they get settled inside a special two-seater Izod IndyCar.

Mario turns around and asks the guy "Sign the waiver?"

The guys looks shocked and yelps "Waiver?!"

They pull away and while Mario is shown with beautiful, opera music in his head and is seen checking out the passing scenery, including a beautiful woman in the stands, the guy in the back seat is screaming at the top of the lungs.

On Saturday morning I found out that there is truth in advertising, at least when it comes to this spot.

At Pocono Raceway I got to sit in the back seat of a special two-seater. It might have even been the same one used in the commercial.

Pocono had extended the invitation for various media, track officials and other dignitaries as part of IndyCar's grand return to the "Tricky Triangle" for the first time since 1989. You know, a nice, simple research project to help with coverage.

There were three drivers giving out the rides and Morning Call colleague Paul Reinhard yelled over to the guys who were coordinating everything to have me go with Mario, just as he did minutes earlier. Reinhard, who knows him well enough to get away with it, said to Mario as he exited: "With a little more practice, I think you're gonna do just fine."

My experience wasn't exactly as shown in the commercial.

I had my helmet on long before I squeezed, twisted and wedged my way into the back-seat cockpit, vowing to lose about 20 pounds before IndyCar returns next July whether I get another ride or not.

I know that had I stayed in my black National Guard-sponsored racing suit for another 15 minutes in that blistering 90-degree heat, I might have dropped those 20 right there.

And, the waiver part was definitely signed long before I approached the car.

It's a little unnerving to be taking what's supposed to be a joy ride and being asked for your blood type, your medical insurance info and who to call in case of an emergency. But we filled it all out quickly without thinking about why the info might actually be needed.

A little nervous just hearing the sounds of cars zooming past me at 170 to 180 mph, I tapped Mario on the helmet as I got in back of the shiny, open-wheel masterpiece and probably sounded like a schoolgirl when I yelled: "Hey, Mario, you've got Keith Groller with you now. You're the best!"

As if he needed encouragement.

To his immense credit, and my soaring pulse rate, he didn't hold back during the fastest two minutes of my life. It was just five miles, two times around the track. But it was long enough.

I didn't scream. I didn't have time considering my life was flashing before eyes and I was worried the helmet would dislodge, maybe taking my head with it.

I was thinking that if Mario wasn't a hero to thousands, if not millions, of racing fans, he might become an even greater hero to many longtime Morning Call sports section readers if he'd be the one to take me out.

We came close enough to the wall a few times for me to wonder whether I'd ever see my computer screen again.

But Mario showed he still had it and controlled the car beautifully. I don't know if he was checking out the leaves on the trees in the nearby mountains or scoping out the bleachers for a Miss Pocono candidate during our drive, but it was flawless.

Still giddy, I took my helmet and gloves off and yelled "Thank you!" to Mario.

And I was thinking that they should have filmed a Geico commercial with me and those two annoying strummers saying, "How happy are folks who switched to Geico?" Happier than Keith Groller in a race car with Mario Andretti."

While I can take something truly memorable off my bucket list, don't look for a sequel. I am not ready to get into a boxing ring with Larry Holmes, go one-on-one with Larry Miller or get tackled by Chuck Bednarik. I'll leave those assignments to Reinhard.

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