

Mario Andretti Honored by National Motorsports Press Group

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Mario Andretti with Kenny Bruce, President of the National Motorsports Press Association, after Mario's induction into the NMPA Hall of Fame in Concord, North Carolina, Saturday, January 25, 2014.

Photo: David Griffin/NMPA

CONCORD, N.C. – Even though the national and local motorsports media has been decimated by layoffs and beat eliminations over the last several years, Saturday's National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame induction ceremonies proved that there still is power of the press.

The NMPA inducted three heavyweights of their respective areas, honoring the legendary Mario Andretti, NASCAR crew chief/team owner Ray Evernham and noted journalist Steve Waid.

Andretti was honored for a lifetime of achievement across several forms of motorsports, including being a past Formula One and four-time Indy car champion, as well as Daytona 500 and Indianapolis 500 winner.

Voted "Driver of the Century" by several media entities over the years including the Associated Press and Racer magazine, Andretti, who turns 74 on Feb. 28, looked like he could still climb into a modern-day Indy car and give today's stars a run for their money.

Being voted into the NMPA Hall of Fame was one of the highlights of his career, Andretti said.

"You get that beautiful call and then it gives you a chance to pause and look back at everything that has happened to you, to count your blessings," he said. "The greatest compliment is your work has been acknowledged, and this (his induction) is what it's all about."

In typical gentlemanly fashion, Andretti was humbled by the honor, while at the same time stressing that even while the media ranks have greatly decreased in recent years, there is still a significant need for the media.

“I feel almost like an intruder because it’s motorsports press. I’ve never written a column in my life,” Andretti said with a smile.

He added in a more serious vein, “I don’t think anyone appreciates the value of the press more than I do, because we all need to realize that no matter how exciting the sport can be, the talent involved and so forth.

“But unless there is somebody out there to tell the story, there’s no value and nobody knows. It’s because of the press that the sport of motor racing is enjoying the popularity that it’s enjoying today, no question about it.”

Andretti reminisced about his storied career, giving particular credit to his wife of 52 years, Dee Ann, as well as reflecting upon some of the downsides of his four-decade racing career.

“(Dee Ann’s) not a race fan, either. But somehow, she got sucked into it,” he said with a laugh. “All along, she held everything solid behind. God knows I was selfish, I just wanted to race, there were no picnics on weekends for us. (My daughter Barbie) reminded me, ‘Dad, you were not even at my graduation.’ I know, and I’m so sorry, but I had to work.”

And work Andretti did, becoming one of the greatest and most successful drivers in all motorsports, particularly with his versatility and willingness to drive pretty much anything that had four wheels on it.

He drew a huge round of laughs from the approximately 250 attendees at the induction banquet when he related a story involving eldest son Michael, who is now the principal owner of the Andretti Autosport car on the Izod IndyCar Series.

“Michael was in school at six or seven years old, and the teacher asked the kids what their fathers did,” Mario said. “She got to Michael and Michael said, ‘He goes to the airport and makes bread.’ The reason he said that is he’d always see me pack my suitcase and my helmet bag and he’d ask, ‘Dad, where are you going?’ I’d tell him, ‘I’m going to the airport. Got to make the bread.’ “

Andretti was presented for induction into the NMPA Hall of Fame by NBC Sports’ Leigh Diffey, who observed that even in retirement, Andretti is still a man in demand, particularly by members of the media.

“You were so appealing to the media,” Diffey said of Andretti. “You were always available. ... I don’t think you’ve ever had a bad soundbite. You’re always guaranteed to give a good quote. It’s still happening today – Mario gets asked 20 to 30 times a month to be interviewed by various publications because Mario has a legitimate choice and a legitimate opinion.”

Andretti was awarded the traditional grey NMPA jacket and a plaque as symbols of his induction.

“I count my blessings every day because I’ve been so, so fortunate to have a long career and be able to meet so many incredible people along the way – and some of them are in this room,” he

said. "I look back (on his storied career) with no regrets whatsoever. ... To be able to have a long career like I have ... it allowed me to retire on my own terms."

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