

COMMENTARY

The world according to Mario Andretti

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Mario Andretti has an unmatched résumé in racing, winning in NASCAR, Indy cars, F1 and sports cars.

INDIANAPOLIS -- We are often reminded that the only constant in life is change.

This year, it seems auto racing is pushing that old axiom to the limit, with major changes in almost every professional category of the sport in America, with the exception of NHRA drag racing.

NASCAR has expanded and revamped its postseason playoff system, adding more drivers and creating stick-and-ball style eliminations. There are also rule changes, chiefly aimed at the ride height, that alter the way teams set up their cars.

Formula One is introducing a whole new engine formula, with downsized V-6 engines and myriad hybrid electronics and driver aids that are currently making life miserable for engineers and technicians. F1 also has taken steps to try to slow down [Sebastian Vettel](#)'s dominance by offering double points for the final race of the season.

The Verizon IndyCar Series hasn't worried about a championship blowout

since 2005, yet it has implemented a major shakeup to its point system, doling out double points for 500-mile races and laying a ton of points on the line for the revised Indianapolis 500 qualifying format.

And the newly minted TUDOR United Sports Car Championship has taken micromanagement to a new level by attempting to balance the performance of two radically different classes of cars. The illusion of parity is almost there, but at the expense of a lot of unhappy competitors.

With such a dramatically altered landscape, it made sense to talk to a man who has done it all -- and won it all. With victories in the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500, classic endurance races and a Formula One world championship, [Mario Andretti](#)'s résumé is unmatched.

Although it has been 20 years since the "Arrivederci, Mario!" tour that announced his retirement from full-time competition, Andretti hasn't slowed down much. He is still very much involved in racing through his longtime association with Firestone, and he rarely turns down the opportunity to take the wheel to give pace car rides or two-seat Indy car rides.

We started by discussing the changes to the qualifying format for the Indianapolis 500, chiefly moving Pole Day to the second day of action.

"Conventional wisdom says if it's not broke, don't fix it," said Andretti, who sat on the Indianapolis pole in 1965, '66 and '87. "But I think in some areas, tweaks need to be done. That's how you progress. You can't sit still. I know there's tradition and a lot comes into play.

"I thought the last tweak they made [adding a 'Fast Nine' shootout in 2009] was awesome. Now they're trying to make it more interesting both days, and I think what they have in place could work out OK. You have to wait and see, I suppose. The fact they are trying to do something different, that could be better, is a good thing. I'm all for it actually."

Andretti is also in favor of the Verizon IndyCar Series' stated intention to try to set a track record at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Arie Luyendyk set the one-lap (237.260 mph) and four-lap (236.986) records in 1996.

"As a driver, I would say bring it on," Andretti said. "Maybe if I was an owner I'd think differently. The numbers usually play, especially at Indy, because they're so phenomenal.

"Do we need to be concerned from a safety standpoint? Of course. Right now they're right on the edge of cornering as fast as they're going down the

straightaway. They're only losing a few revs through the corner. All they need to do is pop it up by another 100 horsepower and that would do the trick to get them to 235 or 236."

Andretti is less enthusiastic about the changes in Formula One, where the change from a 2.4-liter V-8 to a turbocharged 1.6-liter V-6 left many fans disappointed about the sound quality of the new engines.

Despite the new engine regulations, which also introduced much more intricate forms of energy recovery than the KERS system already in use, F1 teams were allowed only 12 days of preseason testing. Fears of a farcical opening round at the Australian Grand Prix were allayed, but two championship favorites -- four-time defending world champion [Sebastian Vettel](#) and 2008 titlist [Lewis Hamilton](#) -- retired from the race with engine problems within a handful of laps.

"I think quite honestly that they've overdone it, with the gigantic rule change they made -- especially on the technical side," Andretti said. "It's got no spectator value whatsoever. The cost factor is ridiculous, and I think it's taking away from the show, quite honestly. It puts more of the onus on the haves and the have-nots.

"Mercedes obviously is going to thrive on that because of all the manufacturers, they're probably the most liquid to get into that area and it's showing. But is that going to do anything for the show? I think it's detracting, and the pure music of those 18,000-rpm engines is going to be missed."

Andretti compiled an enviable record in sports car racing, with three victories in the 12 Hours of Sebring, one triumph in the fuel-crisis-shortened 6 Hours of Daytona, a class win at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, and numerous wins for Ferrari in the sport's most famous era, often teamed with Jacky Ickx.

After watching this year's enduros at Daytona and Sebring, Andretti expressed concern that IMSA will likely change the rules on a race-by-race basis to balance the performance between the Daytona prototypes and ALMS P2 prototypes that compete in the merged TUDOR United Sports Car Championship.



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Mario Andretti said he doesn't see the value for fans in the many changes Formula One made in the offseason.

"That's always a daunting job, trying to balance performance, because it's a judgment call," he said. "I know they're trying to keep some of the equipment from the ALMS still alive, but right now with the series, obviously, the Daytona prototypes have to be the top class. It's an old argument and it's really tough, but it's better than saying: 'You can't run them.' They're at least keeping that investment alive."

"It's been exciting," he added. "The races have been competitive and the reliability factor is there. When you have a 24-hour and a 12-hour [races], your two marquee races, with close finishes, there's something positive to be said for that."

The 1967 Daytona 500 winner is split on NASCAR's 2014 changes, coming down in favor of group shootout qualifying, but questioning the logic of the new Chase for the Sprint Cup format.

"You've got to give them credit for trying," Andretti said. "Quite honestly, they had to do something about qualifying, especially at the superspeedways. It was not very exciting to watch one car qualifying and now at least you have a different element. There's something to follow and pursue and maybe that will get the interest up."

"I can't really as a former driver get my arms around the Chase format," he added. "Like always, I definitely want to put a premium on winning. But there's also something to be said for being up there every week. You're still a competitor and could be a worthy champion. You could probably have twice the points heading into the Chase as somebody who won one race and finished 35th in every other one of them."

Andretti also has his doubts about the winner-take-all finale.

"It's like the SCCA -- you could be winning the whole season, but if you finish second in the runoff, you lose the championship," he said. "It's not a perfect world, that's for sure, but I'm not sure the new Chase is really a forward or positive move."

http://espn.go.com/racing/indycar/story/_/id/10664878/indycar-formula-one-nascar-mario-andretti-shares-racing-observations