

Mario Andretti and the Brutal Magic of Monza

Triumph and death at Italy's most famous racetrack.

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My life came full circle at Monza, in Italy. For me, that's where it all began.

When I was a kid, the family was displaced from our home after World War II. We were in a refugee camp that was in an old monastery inside the walls of the city of

Lucca, in Tuscany. My brother Aldo and I were always enthralled with cars. We used to hang out at this parking garage. The owner let us park cars, and that's how we learned to drive. I was 12 years old. We could hardly reach the pedals, but we were doing burnouts. Those poor customers!

In 1954, we went to Monza, where we saw the Italian Grand Prix. Mercedes was dominating that year, as it is now. My idol, Alberto Ascari, was driving for Ferrari. It was fascinating to watch Ascari battle Juan Manuel Fangio in his Mercedes. Fangio won, and we were all totally mesmerized. I always say: That's where the dye was cast, as far as the dreams of a young child.

Years later, in 1968, I made my debut in Formula 1 at Monza. By this time, I was an American citizen, but the fans treated me like I was Italian. I was invited to race for Lotus, and they booked me at the Hotel de la Ville, right near the track. That's where all the top echelon drivers stayed, and where they still do. You'd go to dinner and they were all there. I was a rookie, and I stayed in the room where Jimmy Clark had stayed. (Clark, one of the greatest racers of all time, had perished in a [crash in Germany](#) just five months earlier.)



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Because it was so tied with the legacy of Ferrari, Maserati and Alfa Romeo, Monza was already legendary. And here was this place that I had watched Ascari as a kid. It was, and still is, one of the fastest tracks, because it has these two long straightaways. It's not the most technical of tracks, but never mind: It's Monza.

Back then, every lap you did in practice in Formula 1 counted for qualifying. I had to race at the Hoosier Hundred in Indiana that Saturday—Champ Cars, in the dirt. And the Grand Prix of course was on Sunday. So I had to get my qualifying time done early Friday at Monza, so I could catch an afternoon flight to New York, and then land in Indiana by helicopter in time for the race. When I left Italy, as I recall, I was quickest by 7/10s of a second, which was a lot. When I returned to Monza from Indiana (Andretti came in second in the 1968 Hoosier Hundred, behind A.J. Foyt), I was still seventh on the grid. But Ferrari protested, saying I'd broken a rule by competing in another race less than 24 hours before. I missed the deadline by about an hour, and so my actual first Formula 1 race was two races later, at Watkins Glen.

“It's Not The Most Technical Of Tracks, But Never Mind: It's Monza.”

But good things kept happening to me at Monza. I drove one of my first races for Ferrari there. Back then, there was a banking used in part of the track, like an oval banking. It was so steep, it was just amazing. (The banking is still there; you can hike through some woods and walk on it.) Later, I won the 1,000-kilometer sports car race there for Alfa Romeo.

Monza was known for the great men who had died there. The track claimed my idol, Alberto Ascari, in 1955. It claimed Wolfgang von Trips in 1961, in the race in which American driver Phil Hill won the World Championship. And later, Jochen

Rindt, the only driver to win the F1 title posthumously. There were many others. It was a dangerous track because of the very high speed. But that did not deter any of us, I can assure you of that.



BOB HARMEYER/ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

In 1978, I came to Monza with Lotus knowing that I could clinch the Formula 1 World Championship. No American had won the title since Phil Hill in 1961, and though I was born in Italy, I was proud to be racing under the American flag. My teammate and good friend, Ronnie Peterson, was in second in the championship. By this time, we were staying at the Villa d'Este on Lake Como, and we flew in to Monza by helicopter.

Things were going great that weekend. I was starting on pole. Ronnie, however, was having one of those bad weekends. He crashed in practice, and had to start in a backup car. He started in the middle of the pack, because his car was slower in qualifying. Before the very first turn, there was an accident and the race was red-flagged. I ran to the scene and I saw Ronnie. His car had burst into flames, and he was still in it. When they pulled him out, he was in shock. I thought: He'll be limping for a long time, but he's alive.



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Ronnie Peterson

Because the race was red-flagged before the end of the first lap, there was a full restart. Gilles Villeneuve had qualified second in a Ferrari, so he was next to me. Gilles jumped the start. I reacted, but I held. I never went. I chased him the whole

race and passed him with three laps to go. I won the race and was up on the podium—the crowds igniting as they do at Monza—when I found out both Gilles and I had been penalized one minute. So they gave the race to Niki Lauda, who'd finished well behind us.

I was classified sixth. It was enough to clinch the World Championship. But still, I was going to appeal the decision. I felt sure the start was on camera, and I'd win the appeal.

The next morning, my wife Dee Ann and I were driving to the hospital to see Ronnie. We stopped at a tollbooth and the toll-taker recognized me. He said, "Signore Andretti, are you going to the hospital?" I answered, "Yes." He said, "I just heard on the radio. Ronnie died."

I couldn't believe it. I had to find out the facts, so we rushed to the hospital. There were a lot of press guys there, a lot of chaos. I found out later that Ronnie died of a blood clot that resulted from his injuries.

There was no celebrating the World Championship. And we forgot about the appeal of the race results. That was my race. I won it. But I let it go. Niki Lauda was given the trophy, but he refused to take it. In fact, I still have it in my house. I remember feeling euphoric happiness, and sadness at its worst.

And in a way, that's the legacy of Monza.

[Thirty-seven years later, Mario Andretti is still the last American—and only the second-ever—to claim the Formula 1 World Championship.]

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