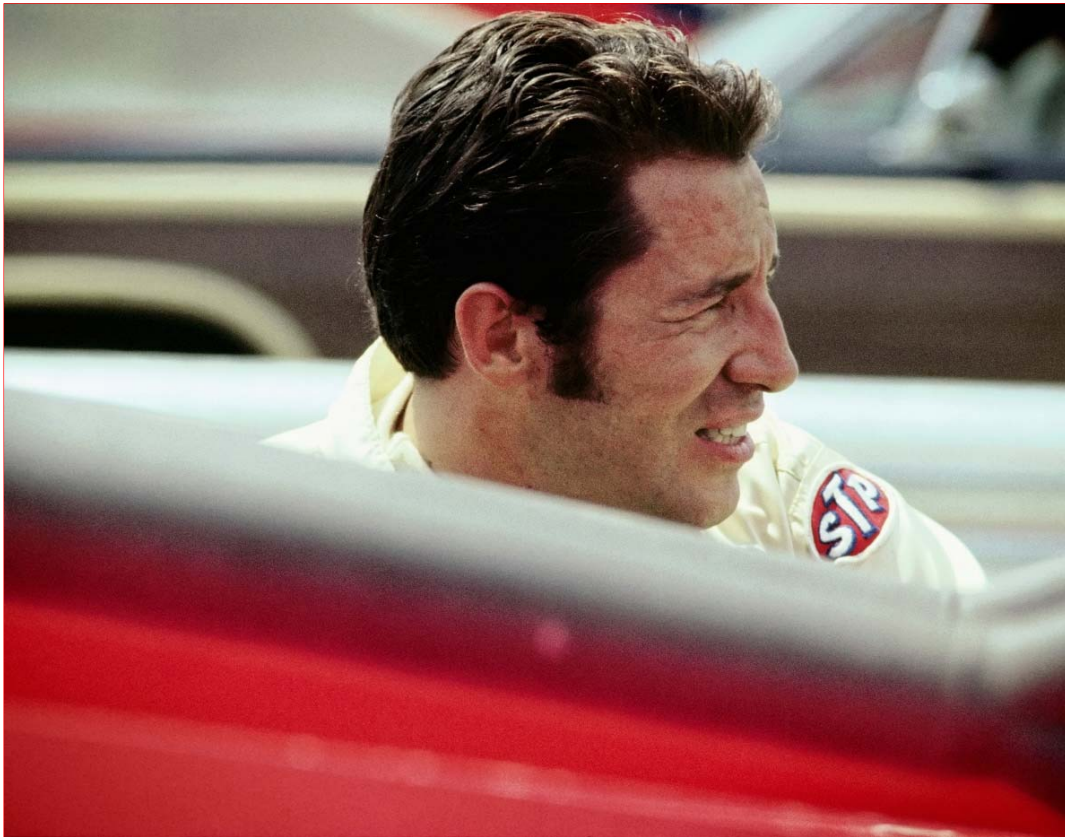


# Letter to My Younger Self

JUN 9 2016

THE PLAYERS' TRIBUNE



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALVIS UPITIS/GETTY IMAGES

MARIO ANDRETTI | RACING LEGEND

Dear Mario,

If you're reading this, it means you've arrived in America. It's 1955, you're just 15 years old and it's been nine days since you boarded that ship with your family and left your home country of Italy. And even though the long trip is over and you've arrived at New York Harbor, I know you're not exactly excited to be here. Your family doesn't speak any English and your father has \$125 to his name.

But more than anything, the reason you're not excited about America is because you've been thinking about the dream you feel you've left behind in Italy. The dream you and your twin brother Aldo share.

The dream of being a race car driver.

That's why I've left this letter for you to read upon your arrival in America. I'm you, Mario, writing from more than 60 years in the future. So as you step onto American soil for the first time, I know exactly how you feel. I remember that feeling of uncertainty — maybe even fear — very well. And I have some advice that's going to help you not only navigate your new country and your new life, but will also help make your dream of becoming a race car driver a reality.



PHOTOGRAPH BY AP IMAGES

I know that for most of those nine days spent on that ship — a ship you would never have boarded if it were up to you — all you thought about was Monza. The Mille Miglia. The Italian Grand Prix. You'd close your eyes, and instead of seeing the crowd of fellow immigrants surrounding you on

that ship, you'd see Alberto Ascari, the world champion, flying around the track at Monza. Instead of the sound of the Atlantic ocean outside the ship's walls, you'd hear the sound of Ascari's Ferrari engine booming as he came out of a turn.

That's where the dream was cast. You remember watching Ascari and thinking, *I want to race Formula One.*

*I want to race at Monza.*

*I want to be a world champion.*

Instead, you find yourself in another country far from Italy, far from Monza — in another world where you don't even know if they *have* auto racing. Where your family will have to start over from nothing. Where there will be a lot of uncertainty.

But you're used to that, aren't you.

As a child, you watched your father lose everything. Your family owned 800 hectares (2,100 acres) of land in Montona, Italy, and your father was the administrator of that land. Then, when World War II ended and the peninsula on which Montona was located became Yugoslavia, your father — out of patriotism and to escape the new communist rule — decided to move the family from its home and head for the new Italian border. Many families chose to do the same, and those who chose to leave were supplied with a temporary transport truck. Whatever you could pack onto the back of that truck — beds, furniture, clothing, animals — that's what you could take with you. Everything else — including your land — you left behind.

When you reached the border, it wasn't like escaping to freedom. No ... you went to a dispersement camp with thousands of others, and you didn't get to decide where you went after that. You were treated not as Italian citizens, but as refugees. They loaded your family onto the cattle train, and off you went, destined for whichever city was most prepared to take on new refugees. Your new home — your new life — was decided for you.

Talk about uncertainty.

You eventually settled at a refugee camp in Lucca, Italy, where you shared one large room with several other families, blankets serving as the walls dividing the rooms. The feeling of being unwelcome in Lucca and being treated like gypsies was very real.

***You'll learn quickly that America is in fact a land of opportunity, even for you.***

These are the things that led your family to take your Uncle Tony's offer to sponsor you for U.S. visas so you could come to America — to his home of Nazareth, Penn. There is money to be made in America, and your father's plan is for the family to spend five years in the U.S., "pick the money off the trees" and then return to Italy in better standing and able to choose your own destiny.

But I have some news for you, Mario.

You're not going back to Italy.

Within those first five years, your family will find jobs and save enough money to buy a house and a car. You'll set such deep roots that once those five years have passed, any thoughts of returning to Italy will have disappeared.



ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

For you and Aldo, though — despite feeling like your dreams of racing in Italy are gone forever and you're entering a new, strange land — you'll learn quickly that America is in fact a land of opportunity, even for you.

At first, everything will be very foreign to you, very different. One of the first places you'll stop on your way to Nazareth will be at a diner in New Jersey. The food will be terrible — nothing like you were used to in Italy. But you'll discover something called a milkshake, which is unlike anything you've had before, and you'll love it.

You'll drink many milkshakes, Mario.

As many as Mom and Dad will allow.

But when you arrive at Uncle Tony's house in Nazareth a couple of days later, that's when you'll find something very familiar.

As the sun sets, you'll see lights in the distance. You'll hear a roar coming from beneath those lights — a familiar roar. You'll look at Aldo, silently agreeing on what you've heard, and you'll both start running.

Run to the noise, Mario. It's more than a mile away, but just run. Follow the lights. Follow the roar.

It's the roar of engines coming from the fairgrounds.

When you get there, out of breath, you'll peek through the gaps in the wooden fencing surrounding the track and see these brute-looking modified stock cars on a half-mile dirt track. They'll look much different than the sophisticated grand prix cars back in Italy — more rugged, pieced and patched together — and the track will look nothing like Monza. It's shaped funny, like an oval.

But it's still *racing*.

You'll again look at Aldo and think, *Maybe America isn't so bad after all ...*



ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

When you find that oval dirt track in Nazareth, I'm telling you, it will open a whole new world for you. No question. Your dream is still to race at Monza, which is now far away — across an entire ocean.

But you gotta start somewhere.

One of the most important pieces of advice I can give to you, Mario, is to never give up on your dream. Never settle. Not for second place, not for anything less than being a world champion, like Alberto Ascari. Don't have a Plan B. Keep your chest out there and don't have any reservations, because everything you dream of will happen to you.

And it will all start at those fairgrounds in Nazareth.



So here's what you need to know about local racing in America: It's very unofficial. It's not like the formula juniors they have in Italy. There is no governing body. They don't even wear racing suits. They're just out there racing in jeans and plain white t-shirts, cigarette packages rolled up in their shirt sleeves. It's more of a club — a group of guys putting cars together and racing for a little prize money and status.

Also, you can't race until you're 21 years old.

... Well, *legally*.

Your uncle Lewis owns a Sunoco station, and you'll start working nights there after school. You'll alternate nights with Aldo, and you'll bring in \$45 a week, giving \$35 to dad and keeping \$10 for yourself. Between you and Aldo, you'll put together a pretty nice stash. And you'll have to, because if you want to race, you'll need a car.

ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

Your time working at the gas station will be a huge benefit to you because you'll learn the language well — the English language, and the automotive language. You'll learn a lot about cars during that time, and by the time you're 17, you and Aldo will team up with a couple of buddies and start building a car of your own to



race at the fairgrounds, once you're old enough. With still four years to go until you turn 21, it'll feel like you have a lot of time. The four of you will pool your money together — \$500 in total — and borrow another \$500 from the bank with the help of a local businessman who comes to the gas station. He'll cosign for you.

When you start building the car, you'll meet a guy named Charlie Mitch. Listen to Charlie, Mario. He's a thinker, and he'll play an instrumental role in getting your racing career off the ground.

At that time, the Hudson will be the car winning all the short-track races in NASCAR. But the guys at the fairgrounds race mostly cut-down rail-job Chevys. So Charlie will say, "You're not

gonna build something like they have and think you're gonna beat them. You gotta come in with something totally different."

That's why you'll decide to go with the Hudson Hornet for your first car.

Most of the car — much like the stock cars at the fairgrounds — will be patchwork. The driver's seat will be made of 25-gallon barrels chopped up and welded together into a makeshift bucket seat. You'll also need a good, strong fuel tank because the cars get banged around quite a bit and you don't want to risk a fire, and you'll notice that most of the guys at the track use quarter-keg beer barrels because they're almost indestructible. You've never stolen anything in your life, Mario, but there will be a beer distributor right across the street from the gas station with a bunch of keg shells sitting out back. So you'll "borrow" one. You'll feel a little guilty, but you'll have to do these things to cut corners and save money, because you won't have much. When all is said and done, you'll have a car built from whatever you could afford and whatever you could find.



ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

But you'll run into one small problem: It will only take you two years to build the car. So you'll be 19 years old with a car that's finished and fit to race, but you won't be old enough to race it. So you'll have to get creative...

You'll turn to a guy you've befriended named Les Young, a local newspaper editor at *The Nazareth Key*. He has access to all kinds of typewriters and printing tools. So you'll ask if he can fudge your birthdays on your driver's licenses.

And he'll do a pretty good job.

Suddenly, on paper, you and Aldo will be 21 — eligible to race.

Remember: No Plan B, Mario. When the time comes for you and Aldo to start racing, you need to do it right. You need to go all out.

And you will.

You won't just go out there in jeans and t-shirts like the rest of the guys. You'll play the part of established racers. You'll buy two Salas Sports racing suits from Italy and show up looking like pros. Everyone will just stare at you.

*Oh, shit ... where'd these guys come from?*

And you'll keep it going from there. They'll come up to you and ask where you're from, and you'll tell them that you and Aldo used to race formula juniors back in Italy — like you're the real deal.

***The rest of the guys in their t-shirts will be staring at you guys like, What the hell just happened?***

It'll psych them out, big time.

And it's total bull.

That first night at the track — in your racing suits and with the rest of the guys still thinking, *Oh, shit ...* — you and Aldo will have a decision to make, because you'll have two drivers and only one car.

So you'll flip a coin. Heads, you drive. Tails, Aldo.

It'll come up tails.

You'll actually be a little relieved by this. You'll get to watch Aldo race and get the lay of the land for when it's your time to race the following weekend.



Being new to the track, Aldo will start at the back of the pack in the heat race — and holy mackerel, Mario, I'm telling you ... he'll pick off the other drivers, one by one, and make his way all the way to the front to win the heat.

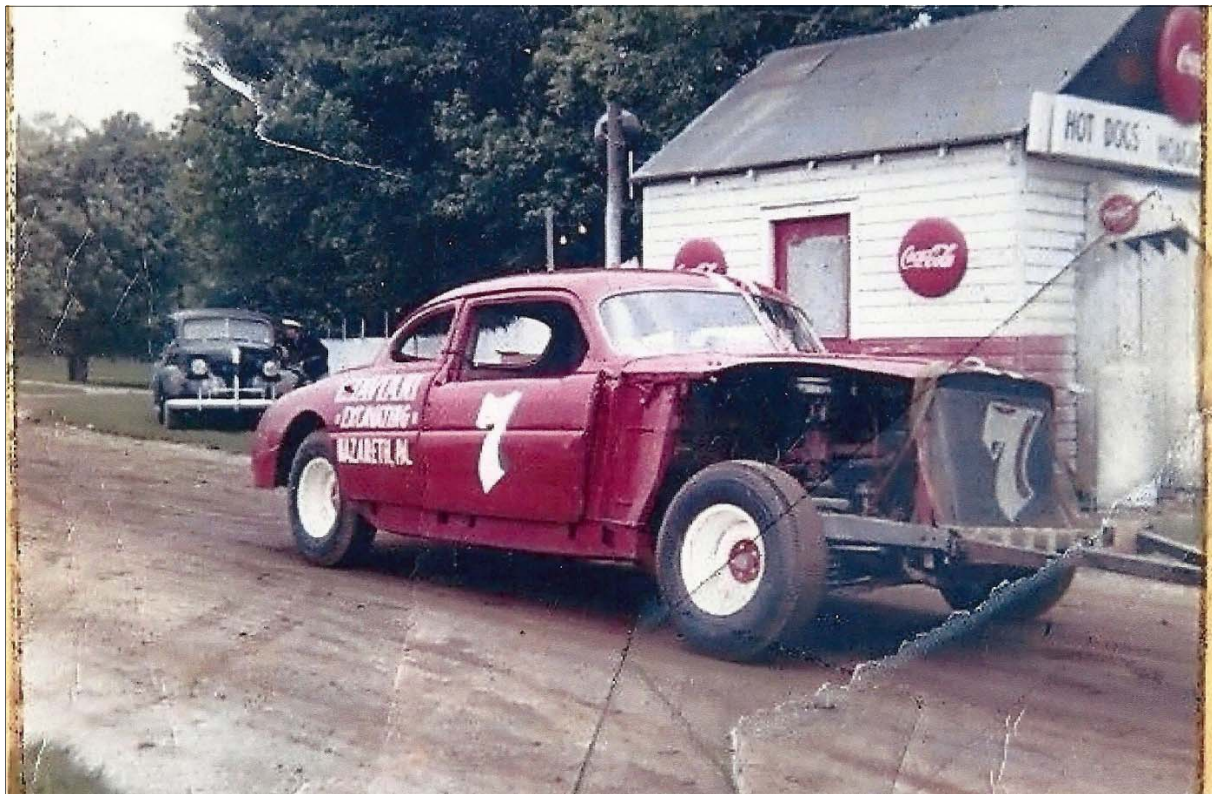
Then, again starting in the back, he'll do the same in the 25-lap, 27-car feature. The other drivers won't stand a chance. He'll get out of the Hudson in his racing suit after dominating the night, and the rest of the guys in their t-shirts will be staring at you guys like, *What the hell just happened?*

Aldo will cash in \$150 that first weekend — \$25 for winning the heat and \$125 for the feature. The following weekend, it'll be your turn. You won't sleep much that week. Aldo set the bar high, and you'll feel the pressure to follow his performance. You'll have the proverbial butterflies, but that's a good thing. It means what you're about to do is important.

But I'm telling you, Mario, don't sweat it.

Because when it's your turn to race that Hudson for the first time, you'll do the same as Aldo, winning the heat and the feature.

You and Aldo will cash in a total of \$300 in two weekends, just racing cars.



ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

Dad never liked the idea of you and Aldo racing. He associates racing with death. There is always something in the newspaper about racing accidents.

Just a few weeks before your arrival in America, Alberto Ascari, your idol, died in an accident at Monza, the track where you watched him and wanted nothing more than to *be* him. On your way to America, while crossing the Atlantic aboard the Conte Biancamano, what is still to this day the greatest tragedy in the history of motorsports occurred at Le Mans when Pierre Levegh's car went into the grandstand and killed some 85 people. It was the tragedy of all tragedies — the top headline on the front page of the newspaper, still very fresh in your own mind as you read this.

And fresh in Dad's mind as well.

Any time you mention your love of racing, Dad thinks you're crazy. So when you start racing at the fairgrounds, you'll have to defy him and hide it from him.

And for that, you'll need a little luck.

I know you don't speak any English right now, but your English will get pretty good, so don't worry about that. From working at the gas station and learning it in school every day, you'll pick the language up quickly. But Dad will have a little more trouble. He'll never really learn English, and that will help you hide the fact that you and Aldo are racing.

You know how nobody calls Dad by his full name, Alvise Luigi? Everyone calls him *Gigi*. Well, at the steel mill — which is where he'll find work in Nazareth — he'll be punching his time card on Monday mornings, and guys will come up to him and pat him on the back, like, "Hey, Gigi! Those boys of yours ... they're doing really good!"

Dad is a proud man, so he won't want the guys thinking he's dumb or that he doesn't understand what they're saying — even though he has *no idea* what they're saying. So he'll just smile and wave, assuming they're saying you're doing a great job cleaning windshields over at the gas station or something.

But they're really talking about how well you raced over the weekend.

... But Dad will find out soon enough.

You understand the dangers of racing, Mario. That's part of what draws you to the sport — the idea of pushing the limits of the car, the track and yourself. It's the pure adrenaline of pushing those limits that captures you. The greater the speed, the greater the risk, the greater the rush. Something you already know but will become much more real throughout your racing life is the fact that that racing is not kind to everyone. But let me tell you, Mario ... you will be one of the very fortunate few who will have a long, successful racing career without suffering any major injuries along the way.

Yes, Mario. You. As impossible as that sounds.

Aldo, however — as talented and fearless of a driver as he will become — will not be quite as fortunate.

His first big accident will come in Hatfield, Penn. in the final race of that first season. Trying to pass the race leader, Aldo will hook the guardrail and the Hudson you built with your buddies will somersault, end over end, down the track. The crash will be so intense that Aldo will emerge with a fractured skull.

At this point, Mom and Dad still don't know you've been racing. When you get to the hospital, Aldo's condition will be so bad that at one point during the night, he will be read his last rites. News of Aldo's injuries will spread like wildfire back in Nazareth, and you'll call Dad and tell him what happened.



ANDRETTI FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH (Left: Mario, Right: Aldo)

That will be a tough phone call, Mario. Both you and Dad will be battling competing emotions. Dad will be concerned about Aldo, but also furious and somewhat vindicated, like, "I told you so!"

You, on the other hand, will want to be there with Aldo, but you'll also have to dodge Dad, because he's probably going to beat the shit out of you for lying to him.

But when he gets to the hospital, the focus will not be on anger, fear or vindication.

It will be solely on Aldo.

He'll spend 62 long days in a coma. When he finally wakes up, you'll be there, and you'll know immediately that everything is going to be O.K. — that he's emerging from the coma the same old Aldo — by his first words.

"I'm just glad ... it was you ... who had to face the old man."

It will take some time for Aldo to fully recover. But within a year, he will be home, you will have both resumed racing and you will have both turned 21. You'll be your own men, *legally* allowed to race, whether Dad likes it or not. He'll be furious when you start racing again. He'll think you've learned your lesson. It will get so bad that he'll come close to disowning you.



FAMILY PATRIARCH "GIGI" ANDRETTI WITH MARIO

But he'll come around.

As you and Aldo continue racing — and winning — Dad will start coming to you asking how Aldo is doing on the track. And he'll go to Aldo and ask about you, too. Before long, he'll even start coming to your races. Growing more and more proud of you and Aldo as you find success on the track, he'll go from almost disowning you, to becoming your biggest fan.

Racing stock cars in Nazareth will be just the beginning, Mario. You're going to graduate quickly to bigger races, and eventually to the biggest races in the world.

You'll win the Daytona 500, the biggest event in stock-car racing. You'll win the Indianapolis 500, the biggest event in American open-wheel

racing. You'll win races in sprint cars, midget cars — you'll even have a stint in drag racing. You'll win on road tracks and oval tracks, paved and dirt.

You're probably thinking, *This all sounds great. But my ultimate dream is to race Formula One at Monza ...*

I know, Mario. And you will.... But I'll tell you about that later, as Monza will take on a whole new meaning for you, for a couple of different reasons.

For now, I want to give you some advice that will not only help guide you as you pursue the success I just mentioned, but also might prevent you from losing some races you could otherwise win.

***You're going to make stupid mistakes that you're going to kick yourself in the ass for one day.***



When you reach that level of racing, Mario, the margin of error is so small, from the preparation to the driving of the car itself. The cars are so fast and the drivers are so skilled that even the smallest mistake or error in judgement can be the difference between winning the race and crashing. You have to stay aggressive and you have to stay confident, but you also have to be smart on the track.

Trust me: There are a lot of instances in which I look back at my racing career and think, *Why did I do that? What was I thinking?*

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!...*

A perfect example is the Formula One race in Belgium in 1977.

It began to rain just before the start of the race. I had won two of the last three races and I felt like I was in a good early position to distance myself in points in the world championship standings. I was on pole in my Lotus, side by side with John Watson in his Alfa Romeo. It was a standing start. At the green light, I got too much wheel spin on the wet track and he beat me off the line — one of the very few times I got beat off the line.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RAINER W. SCHLEGELMILCH/GETTY IMAGES



But as I rushed to make a move, I tapped the back of his car and we both spun out. Knocked him out of the race, and knocked myself out at the same time.

So instead of winning a race where I was on pole and taking a commanding lead in the point standings, I didn't even make it through one lap.

Looking back now, it was probably one of the biggest mistakes of my career.

When you get to that moment, Mario — when your wheels spin and John Watson beats you off the line and takes the lead in Turn 1 — cool it. Don't force it. Be patient. The worst mistakes are often at the start of the race because you've got so much adrenaline going and you think you have to win the race that first lap.

You can't win the race on the first lap, Mario.

But you can lose it.

I think that's part of the best racing advice I can possibly give you: Minimize your mistakes. You minimize mistakes, you minimize failure. You're going to make stupid mistakes that you're going to kick yourself in the ass for one day.

But Belgium will always be the one you wish you had back.

The silver lining in that 1977 season will be that you'll still finish third in the world championship standings, and in your third time racing at Monza, you will win the Italian Grand Prix, the very race you watched Ascari win on his way to a world championship.

But that's not what I meant when I said "Monza will take on a whole new meaning for you." That race will come the following year, in 1978.

Like I said, the sport of racing is not kind to all of us, Mario. But it will be kind to you — so kind that at times you'll even feel guilty, wondering why you are deserving of such good fortune while bad things happen to the drivers closest to you.

To this day, I cannot explain that to you. I just count my blessings every day, because today, at 76 years old, I'm still in one piece, healthy and thriving.

But throughout my racing life, I have lost many of my best friends.

I know these names don't mean anything to you now, but believe me, they will. Names like Pedro Rodriguez and Ayrton Senna. Like Dale Earnhardt and Greg Moore. There are far too many friends lost to the sport than I'd care to count.

I still think often about Billy Foster, who was one of my very best friends. We were like brothers. In 1967, we were at a track in Riverside, Calif. for practice before a stock-car race. He took off for his practice run, and I was the next car in line behind him.

But Billy didn't make it off the track that day, Mario. A brake failure — something out of his control — sent him into the wall, and the head trauma from the crash was more than he could overcome.

***Nothing is ever the same after you lose a buddy — someone who has touched your life.***

I watched it happen — and I had to go out for a practice run right after.

This will be the first time death really hits home for you in your racing life. You and Billy's families will have spent a lot of time together off the track — something many drivers won't allow during those years because death will be so prevalent in the sport that they'll want to minimize their exposure to it.

The hardest part will be going back to your hotel room. You and Billy will have been rooming together, and after his death on the track that day, it will be you who cleans up his room and packs his things.

Talk about hitting home.

I don't have any advice for how to cope with the loss of a friend, Mario. There's nothing that can prepare you for something like that. All I can say is that it's something you never get used to. Nothing is ever the same after you lose a buddy — someone who has touched your life. Billy will be one of those guys.

But the one race in your career that will forever become an example of both the risk and reward — the thrill of victory and the harsh reality — of racing will be the 1978 Italian Grand Prix.

Monza.



Another one of your great friends in racing will be a guy named Ronnie Peterson. He will go down as one of the best drivers ever in Formula One. Not as technical of a driver, just a pure talent when it comes to car control. A Swedish guy, beautiful and handsome, and one of the nicest guys in the world.

To this day, I remember Ronnie well. He played hard, whether we were playing tennis, racing cars or some other toys, or just jacking around. No matter what it was, he was hell for bent. I remember one time when Ronnie came up to the family lake house in the Poconos.... You'll love that lake house, Mario. It'll be a big family retreat, and you'll have every toy under the fricken' sun. One of them will belong to one of your two future sons, Michael. A 250 Honda motocross bike.

Well ... Ronnie will come up, and he'll be there not even five minutes before he asks Michael — who's maybe 14 years old at the time, not much younger than you are right now — “Hey ... can I ride that?” Michael says O.K. and Ronnie takes it out back to a motocross course we have set up behind the house up on the hill — a full course with a bunch of jumps.

A few minutes later, Ronnie comes back down from the motocross course, and he's all torn up and skinned up and the bike is bent to hell. We're like, *What the hell happened?*

Michael has tears in his eyes as he looks at his mangled 250. Ronnie shrugs it off, like, *Oh well ...* And that was just on a family weekend at the lake house. Imagine a guy like that on the track.

He didn't know how to do anything half speed. Hell for bent.

That was Ronnie.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RAINER W. SCHLEGELMILCH/GETTY IMAGES

Both you and Ronnie will go into that 1978 Italian Grand Prix at Monza with a shot at winning the world championship for that season. You'll be on pole with Ronnie a couple of rows behind you, starting fifth.

At the green light, you'll pull away from the field while everyone behind you will get bunched up. At the first turn, another driver will hit Ronnie's wheel, sending Ronnie's car hard into the barrier. His car will catch fire, but they'll be able to pull him out. His leg injuries will be severe, though, and he'll be taken to the hospital.

***I don't have any advice for how to cope with the loss of a friend, Mario. There's nothing that can prepare you for something like that.***

The race will later continue, and you'll finish in fifth place, enough to clinch the world championship.

Twenty-five years after watching Alberto Ascari at Monza — after the dream was cast and you decided that you wanted to race Formula One and become a world champion like your idol — you will live that dream, Mario.

And you won't even be able to celebrate.

Because your friend Ronnie will be in the hospital, where he'll die the next morning from his injuries.

At the exact same time, you'll experience the highest of highs — living your dream of becoming a world champion — and the lowest of lows — the death of a great friend.

The irony is that it will be Ronnie's accident that will clinch the world championship for you. And it's a world championship — the ultimate dream come true — that to this day I would gladly trade to have my friend back.

That's the harsh reality of racing.

It won't just be the deaths of friends that will impact your life, Mario. The accidents that don't result in fatalities will also hit very close to home.

Your two sons, Michael — whom I mentioned — and Jeff, will both become drivers like you. But Jeff will almost lose both of his legs in a crash at Indianapolis. And while you'll be thankful he wasn't killed in the accident, that crash will essentially end his young career.

And while you'll get to live your dream of winning a world championship at Monza — although obviously bittersweet — Aldo won't have that same chance.

You may have noticed that when I mentioned Aldo's accident at the fairgrounds at Nazareth — the one that landed him in a coma — I called it his "first big accident." That's because Aldo will have another big accident in 1969 in a sprint-car race in Iowa. He'll crash into a fence, almost flipping into the grandstand, and he'll suffer severe damage to his face, including 14 facial fractures, along with a broken back. He'll need extensive plastic surgery, to the point where your identical twin brother won't even look like you anymore.

After that, Aldo will never race again.

Like I said, Mario, I count my blessings every day. I count my blessings that my son and brother were not killed in their accidents on the track. I count my blessings that I myself did not die on the track like many of my great friends. I count my blessings that while Aldo's career was cut short — ending just ten years after we ran that Hudson Hornet at the fairgrounds in Nazareth and we came out in the racing suits and everybody thought, *Oh, shit...* — I was fortunate



enough to have a racing career that spanned five decades, winning just about every race under the sun and retiring on my own terms, which is something I never thought possible.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SHARON ELLMAN/AP IMAGES

And I count my blessings that after leaving everything I had ever known in Italy for the uncertainty of America — like you just have — I can look back and say that I have taken advantage of every opportunity and lived my ultimate dreams.

Right now, you have no idea what America has in store for you. You don't want any part of Nazareth, Penn. But more than 60 years later, still calling Nazareth my home to this day, I can assure you that everything will work out for you. No question.

So stay ambitious and stay true to your dream, Mario. Be patient and don't force things early in races. Minimize your mistakes. Count your blessings.

And drive your ass off.

Because I'm telling you: America isn't so bad after all.

– Mario