

Mario Andretti's First Race at Le Mans Was Daunting, Dangerous, and Amazing

Mario Andretti shares his Le Mans memories with our Marshall Pruett.



BY MARSHALL PRUETT / RoadandTrack.com
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Racing legend Mario Andretti made his debut at Le Mans at an incredible time driving for the ultimate team. Drafted into Ford's GT40 program in 1966, Andretti—like the team—was a newcomer to the grueling endurance race. Paired with Belgium's Lucien Bianchi, Andretti quickly found the winding French road course was a perfect match for his driving style.

And in that prehistoric era for driver safety, Andretti's fast hands and heavy right foot also had to contend with exposed trees and other life-threatening obstacles that lined the circuit. Speed, in a 200-plus mph Ford GT40, was a blend of thrill and risk propelled by a 427 cu.in V8 soundtrack.

"It was quite daunting actually because it was really fast," Mario told RoadandTrack.com. "You know, the safety factor, not that we, anywhere we ran was like that, but there were a couple places that I took particular notice. There was the White House [section] before they [replaced it with] the Porsche Curves, and we were going across that freaking unprotected bridge. . . I mean, you miscue there, you're freaking going to smithereens. It was just amazing. It was always foggy there at night because of the river. And of all things, it had to be foggy right at that spot."

Andretti would race for Ford at Le Mans through 1967 and suffer two frustrating failures before turning his attention back to Indy cars. A win at the 1969 Indy 500, famous sports car wins at the 12 Hours of Sebring and other events outside of Le Mans, and his crowning achievement—winning the 1978 Formula 1 world driver's championship—all took place while he waited for a chance to return to France for the 24 Hour.

It finally came in 1983 in a Porsche 956 where he finished third overall, and five more years passed before the German manufacturer assembled an all-Andretti car for Mario, his son Michael, and his nephew John for 1988 where they finished sixth. Another long pause would come as Andretti retired from IndyCar competition after the 1994 season, and with his schedule finally open, he made three consecutive starts from 1995-1997.

1995 would mark Andretti's finest outing as he placed second overall and won the WSC class, which still stands as a point of pride.

"Still one class in 1995, so I can claim I won Le Mans," he said. "A lot of people say, 'you never won Le Mans.' Well, if I didn't win Le Mans, then Corvette never won Le Mans. Class wins; we were second overall but first in class."

Listening to Andretti describe his 50-year-old love affair with Le Mans, it's clear the event also connected with something deeper—something spiritual—inside racing's Greatest of All Time.

"There was something about all of it that really appealed to me," he said. "The ambience, everything that it's got. It's really one of the classics that you want to be part of. I relished every event. Every one that I did. It kicked my ass sometimes, I've made a couple mistakes too that it kicked my ass for. That is life.

"But at the same time we had a good time. There were times where we really had some good running there. Overall, my memories of that place are absolutely 100 percent positive."

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