

Commentary

Welcome to Mario Andretti's world

Updated: May 24, 2012, 3:18 PM ET

By [Ed Hinton](#) / *ESPN.com*



The Mario Andretti-A.J. Foyt Rivalry

Mario Andretti sits down with Ed Hinton to talk about his greatest rival A.J. Foyt and the constant competition between them.

INDIANAPOLIS -- In the perpetual debate over whether motor racing is more car than driver, the driver's role in the Indianapolis 500 is at an all-time low.

This from someone who ought to know -- name of [Mario Andretti](#), the only driver ever to win the Indy 500, the Daytona 500 and the Formula One world championship.

Here, driver input into every lap is now perhaps "20 percent," Andretti said Wednesday. "That's not right. It should be 50-50. Or as close to that as possible."



AP Photo

The Andrettis have shown tremendous dominance through the years at Indy, but Mario's 1969 victory stands alone.

From Indy cars to NASCAR, some de-escalation of engineering could easily put the driver back into the game, Andretti reckons.

The problem here is that "cars today have too much downforce and not enough horsepower," he said.

And, "Even in NASCAR, if they would just cut the spoiler down to here [he held a thumb and finger a few inches apart], those guys would have to back off in the corners.

"And then, you're *driving!* You're *driving!*"

NASCAR is working to make its cars more competitive aerodynamically. In Indy cars, they've already gone too far down that road, Andretti says.

"Here, they just go vrrrrrrmmmm [he mimicked going flat-out], and that's it. The car has either got it or not."

Oh, well. If you have to put up with cars like that, for now, at least Andretti's grandson's car is good enough, going into Sunday's 96th Indy 500, that the family dares to hope for a respite ... once again ... from its decades of atrocious luck here.

"I've never seen him so happy about the car, here, going into the race," Andretti said of grandson [Marco Andretti](#), 25. "So I hope that means something."

Such a hopeful thought is also frightening, because so many times, Mario, and then his son Michael, Marco's father, felt this good about their cars going into this race. So many times, all it meant was heartbreak.

One minute you think he's just Nonno Mario now, just Grandpa Mario, wishing the best for a grandson, just for the family's sake. Then the next minute you realize he is still Mario Andretti, that the sprawling passion is still there in the man who loves motor racing -- all of it, everywhere -- more than anyone else I know.

Wednesday, we had just come off the set of a "NASCAR Now" appearance we did here together on ESPN, a tribute to Mario's greatest rival over the years, A.J. Foyt.

Dutifully, politely, he had spoken of Foyt, of what a flawless driver the raging-bull Texan was on the tracks, and how all those tantrums, thrown hammers, storms of profanity, all amounted to "his way of expressing himself," Mario had said on camera.

During commercial breaks, we had our own whispered, chuckling conversation.

"Interesting they said [Foyt] ran 128 NASCAR races and won seven of them," Mario said under his breath. "Interesting, because I ran 128 Formula One races. I won 12, and the world championship."

The best and longest-running rivalry in all of racing still rages deep inside each man. This time last year I spent an afternoon with Foyt, who still let seething about Andretti show.

Now, Mario and I were off camera and weren't bound by one theme for one television show.



AP Photo/George Nikitin

Mario Andretti, right, and Michael Andretti, left, help third-generation driver Marco Andretti celebrate his maiden IndyCar victory at Sonoma in 2006.

In the old debate about who was better, Andretti or Foyt -- Foyt never ran F1 but did win the 24 Hours of Le Mans in addition to the Daytona 500 and four Indy 500s -- I have my own inner conflict.

That is, which driver in all the world I'd rather sit down with for a comprehensive conversation about racing.

Foyt has always lived in what I call "The World According to A.J."

So the edge has to go to Mario, because at age 72 he follows it all so closely and cares so deeply about it all.

And his personal passion is a bit more active. Foyt's grandson, A.J. Foyt IV, called Anthony by the family, was star-crossed here and departed without making much of a ripple. Marco Andretti came within the blink of an eye of winning the 500 as a rookie in 2006.

Yet Marco now is carrying his own burden of the Andretti heartbreak at Indy into the third generation.

Foyt has his four Indy wins, but Mario led more laps here in his career than Foyt did. [Michael Andretti](#) led more laps here than any non-winner, and this week was inducted into the Hall of Fame here.

The Andrettis have but one Indy 500 win, Mario's in 1969, to show for all that dominance, all that color they added to this place, all that adrenalin they pumped into these, the most massive grandstands on the face of the earth, for all these decades.

Now, with Marco running so well this month -- he qualified fourth, and more importantly, has been very consistent in traffic during practice -- "You think about everything," his Nonno Mario said. "I hope I don't jinx it. I hope I don't do this, I hope I don't do that.' You think of everything, but I don't want to spoil anything.

"You know how fickle the game is."

Right out of the gate, as a rookie in '06, Marco tasted the Andretti heartbreak in full measure. As the grandstands thundered approval, he led in the waning laps, right down to the checkered flag, when [Sam Hornish Jr.](#) flashed past him.

To me, that snuffed what would have been a glorious revival of this grand old race itself, a win by the most magical motorsports surname in the world. That 500 got no huge mention in the newspapers or on television in Europe, South America, Asia, Australia ... but "Andretti wins Indy" would have.

Now, with [Danica Patrick](#) gone to NASCAR, I figure Marco is the singular remaining driver who could jump start the Indy 500 in the world's headlines with a win.

Mario smiled and shrugged.

"I'll buy that," he said.

So the direction of the world's oldest, best-known race might now rest on Marco's shoulders.

"I don't even look at it that way," Mario said. "I'd just like him to win. Period. I'd celebrate until the cows come home if he wins it. That's what we're here for ... all my life. ... That's what you look for. That's what you strive for. And to have a family member. ... Whenever he does well, I mean, I feel so good -- as good as when things happen to me. And then I'm at some airport and hear, 'Hey, your grandson ...' It's good. A good feeling. It's all in the family.

"We all benefit, or, you know, suffer."

All that suffering, all these years ... and yet the overall good of "the game," as Mario calls it, still matters foremost to him.

Take my observation about this year's Indy cars.

"How many times has it been said here that 'real race cars don't have fenders'?" I said. "Well, now ..."

He gave out a wry chuckle, acknowledging exactly what I meant.



ISC Archives/Getty Images

Mario Andretti celebrated only one victory in NASCAR circles, but it was a biggie: the '67 Daytona 500.

The 2012 cars, by regulation, are partially fendered, on the rear, for safety's sake -- to keep the cars from interlocking wheels and launching each other. That came in the wake of the death of Dan Wheldon at Las Vegas last October.

Andretti, and other living Indy legends such as four-time winner Rick Mears, are "on the same page," Mario said. "We feel the cars today have too much downforce and not enough horsepower.

"They can't get away from each other. On the superspeedways, they're like the plate races in NASCAR -- just full speed all the time. But running inches apart in stock cars and running inches apart with open-wheel cars are two different things."

That is, the open-wheel cars are far more dangerous because they don't -- or didn't -- have fenders.

"So they tried to design a car that will prevent interlocking wheels -- because, I mean, you could wind up in the grandstands," he said. "So it's a safety thing. For now."

But not for long, he hopes. Andretti is the deepest sort of traditionalist and is uncomfortable with breaking more than 100 years of open-wheel tradition.

To return to that, "I personally wish the cars had less downforce," he said. "Actually, I'm lobbying for that. It would be easy to redesign some of the aero package ..."

And then be safe enough to go with completely exposed wheels again?

"Yes, you could then," he said. "I think you could go back to tradition. Formula One, they're not doing anything [to guard the wheels]. It's open-wheel. Open-wheel is open-wheel. If not, you go to sports cars."

Indeed, that's what the new Indy cars look like to me -- prototype sports cars in the rear and open-wheel cars in the front.

"The cars are way too stuck -- you know, in the corners," Andretti said. "You can't get away from each other. OK, so we've got to make the cars a little more forgiving if those guys touch ..."

I've thought since the CART-IRL split of 1996 that the IRL (now INDYCAR) side was trying too hard to emulate the side-by-side racing of NASCAR.

"I don't think it was designed to go in this direction," Andretti said. "I think a lot of it is a result of the split. Because on the IndyCar side, the IRL side, they had so many inexperienced drivers that they made sure the cars were stable ..."

"But now you've got the full fledge of all the talents [of the current-generation drivers]. I mean, these guys are flat [running wide open, in NASCAR parlance]. They go out of the pit, they're flat."

"Nobody lifts."

"So that, in my opinion, has to be the next change."

To put some driving skill back into it?

"Yes!"

The concern is that the super-stable cars, with too little power, are "taking a lot of that need for finesse and skill away from these guys," he said.

"Interesting they said [A.J. Foyt] ran 128 NASCAR races and won seven of them. Interesting, because I ran 128 Formula One races. I won 12, and the world championship.

"Here, they just go vrrrrrrmmmm], and that's it. The car has either got it or not. So what's the input of the driver?

"What did he have, 20 percent? That's not right. It should be 50-50. Or as close to that as possible."

This year, given what they had to work with, Michael Andretti's team "did everything they possibly could," Mario said. "They unloaded fast, and they've kept it up."

Sunday, Andretti Autosport drivers will occupy three of the top four starting positions.

And in the eyes of Nonno Mario, they just might have had the most productive practice sessions of any team here.

"With five cars on the team, when they were running on a race setup, they would coordinate to go out together," Mario said. "As in NASCAR, being alone on the track doesn't teach you anything."

Even here, "You had to be in the draft, and this way you were guaranteed you had at least five cars, and then you could mix it up with others.

"That was huge for them, I think.

"Marco -- obviously we talk -- really loved that. He's got good race craft, that kid. He really knows how to race. And he was really getting a good read on the air from the other cars -- what was happening, where ...

"He's so happy about the car -- which, you know, hopefully ..."

He wouldn't finish the sentence. Too many decades of too much disappointment for that.

"I think everybody's predicting a pretty slippery situation," he said, referring to the forecast for sweltering temperatures Sunday. "But they're ready for it, as far as track conditions."

As for the group preparation, "I think it was golden. I hope it plays out."

But for now, with Marco knowing only the Andretti sting at Indy and not the Andretti triumph, does Nonno Mario bleed for his grandson? Ache for him?

He chuckled.

"Of course."

"Of course, you do."

http://espn.go.com/racing/indycar/story/_/id/7967664/indycar-world-according-mario-andretti