

Mario Andretti Q&A: Time for US F1™ fans to rejoice

The 2012 Formula 1 United States Grand Prix will mark the much-anticipated return of F1 racing to the USA, at a spectacular, dedicated venue which is rapidly nearing completion - the all-new Circuit of The Americas in Austin, Texas. And who better to act as an ambassador for the track than the man they have just appointed, 1978 Formula One world champion Mario Andretti - the last American to win the F1 drivers' title and all-round motorsport legend. Formula1.com caught up with Andretti to discover just why American F1 fans are in for such a huge treat come November...

Q: Mario, the Circuit of The Americas is the first purpose-built Formula One track in the United States and the question is why did it take so long? And are Texans more visionary?

Mario Andretti: Ha, I only can say thank God for the Texans. Yes, it takes vision to undertake a project like this. My hat is off to the investors - anyone involved for believing in our sport. That becomes a big asset to motorsports. Period. Not just Formula One. When it comes to tracks in America we have very traditional circuits, but they are very substandard when it comes to the level that is expected nowadays. To cut a long story short, I have no idea why it took so long, but the important thing is that it's here and that it is happening. (laughs)



Q: What will that mean for the perception of Formula One in the United States - now that it has a real home and is no longer just a lodger elsewhere?

MA: It can only be positive. I said it a million times and I will continue to say it: the Formula One fan base in the United States is very much understated and I think it will be embraced now to have a proper, solid home. Something that you can look forward to every year and not just move around - put up a tent there, take a tent down there. This now is solid. Formula One fans can now rejoice, in my opinion, as we now finally have a home.



Q: What will that mean for the driver talent in the US? Will they start to understand better that Formula One could be a career option for them? We haven't seen a US driver regularly on the grid in a long time...

MA: America is probably the only country in the world that can provide and satisfy the career of a racing driver with either IndyCar or NASCAR, so aspirants never have to worry about being at Formula One level. Now, if you have a Formula One race that you can look forward to - at its own track - I think that there are many youngsters in the United States who could start to dream about racing in Formula One. But they would need some help - some sponsors to get behind them to land seats in top teams - not just be there, but to have real chances for results and to give the sport a real chance to get popular. Even when I was doing Formula One on a part-time basis, a team back then could add a third car. I was lucky as I was always with one of the top teams that gave me the opportunity to get results - and that is what the youngsters need today. And the Circuit of The Americas in my opinion will be a showcase to begin that. An American in Formula One will be good for Formula One - and it is good for America. It's win-win.



Q: So why is it that Formula One has struggled so much in the US in recent years - because it was big in your time? In the past there have been as many as three rounds in the United

States, then suddenly there was a break. What caused it?

MA: Stability. It is as simple as that. You had Watkins Glen, you had Phoenix, you had Long Beach - you had many venues, but no stability. If you don't have stability you cannot look forward and make plans from year to year. That is a huge aspect, in my opinion, why Formula One became less interesting. From a fan's standpoint he must be able to look forward to it - and you didn't have that. So finally that's going to be there.

Q: How important is it where it is in the United States?

MA: As long as it is good, I am not sure if it really matters where it is. (laughs) Texas can be a great host. The city of Austin is a city that has a lot to offer, so it will be a great host city. Texas is very approachable, it has good accessibility from South America with its huge Formula One fan base. Strategically, I think it is much better than people might think.



Q: You came fresh from the site: which track does it remind you of?

MA: Hermann Tilke tried to incorporate some famous tracks - it has a bit of Silverstone, it has a bit of Hockenheim - but in the end each circuit has to have its own character. What is very important is that you have elevation changes, which gives the circuit character to begin with. Then you have to incorporate overtaking. That is super important. My favourite part of the track by far will be Turn One - it is going uphill. It is the start-finish line straight and then you go straight uphill and then hard braking to the left. That invites overtaking there.

Q: How do you see Formula One as a spectator?

MA: I love it. Formula One is enjoying its best time right now, no question. The technology factor is good; it is still individual; the cars are so different - but still perform the same. That is awesome. It can't be any better than that. So I would say don't change it, because the product is fantastic. (laughs) This season now is a season that you dream of. I think there is nobody who will be able to predict the outcome of a race - or even the top three. Two years ago I could almost tell you the top three at every race - this season: impossible!

Q: If you look at the tracks nowadays - the huge run-off areas - and compare it with the time you were racing in Formula One, do you wish you could have been racing today?

MA: Of course! That's progress. If you now make a mistake you can recover. It's not ruining your day totally. That is great. It is incredible for the show. Look at the amount of cars that finish today. The opportunity to finish a race even with a mistake is there. In my day with a mistake you had something like a 40 percent chance of finishing. Imagine how many races you are in the

lead and then 'bye-bye'!

Q: Jacques Villeneuve said recently that the improved safety of the tracks means the drivers lose respect for each other. They are more boorish because the consequences are lesser....

MA: That's b*ll! As a driver you always push the envelope. When there was no safety we had different parameters - now with more safety we go further. And that's fair enough. It's the same thing with the cars. When there was little protection you thought a little more - and when you get more protection you think 'shoot', and you go for it. That's not bad - and it's not even about respect: the competitive spirit always takes you to the limit. If the limit increases, that's where you go - otherwise you get beat.



Q: What do you think about the level of the drivers today?

MA: I can only say, 'wow'! How many world champions are on the grid? There you have it. Take Michael Schumacher. He's got a strong fan base and honestly we all want to see him succeed so badly - probably more than he does! (laughs) You have Kimi (Raikkonen) coming back as if he had never left. And then you have some fantastic new faces like Grosjean. Then, of course, the phenomenal performances of Vettel, Hamilton and Alonso from the category of the absolute elite. You have every possible scenario in place right now.

Q: Prior to Sergio Perez, there hadn't been a Mexican driver in Formula One for decades. Yet Formula One is still big in Mexico. What do you think about Perez? Will he trigger more fans?

MA: It's a pretty good opportunity that Carlos Slim has given him - which is what it takes some times: someone who believes in a local talent and gets behind him to help get him exposure. Sergio is doing a great job and it is obvious that Mexico is proud. I think that America is looking for the same thing - somebody who can get behind some of these young talents, because

nowadays that is how it works.

Q: Do you see somebody in the United States of similar talent?

MA: Ah, the talent is there, no doubt. All it takes is to get some opportunity to be exposed. And that hasn't been existing much.

Q: When Formula One goes back the United States, does it have to adapt? The American fans are used to a closer interaction with their heroes...

MA: My advice: don't change a thing! (laughs)

<http://www.formula1.com/news/interviews/2012/6/13455.html>