

## Indianapolis Motor Speedway's Greatest 33



Mario Andretti is renowned as perhaps the most versatile racer of all time and he was named “Driver of the Century” by the Associated Press in 2000. He won everything from the Pikes Peak Hill Climb to the Daytona 500 to the Formula 1 World Championship.

But despite victory in the 1969 Indianapolis 500, Mario’s legendary bad luck at Indianapolis Motor Speedway is an integral part of his remarkable story.

Born along with twin brother Aldo in Montona, Italy in 1940, Mario gained an appreciation of car racing when he saw his hero Alberto Ascari race in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza in 1954. When the Andretti family immigrated to America in 1955 and settled in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, the Andretti boys thought their dreams of racing were dashed. Then they realized there was a half-mile oval dirt track nearby and their entire perception of the sport changed.

In 1959, Aldo and Mario built a race car out of a 1948 Hudson Hornet, and managed to keep their racing a secret from their disapproving father. But their cover was blown when Aldo was hospitalized after a huge crash at the end of the season.

While Aldo returned to race sporadically for the next ten years. Meanwhile, Mario began making a name for himself as he worked through the ranks of Midget and Sprint Car racing on the East Coast. He made his USAC Championship Indy car debut at Trenton Speedway in April, 1964 and that summer attracted the attention of Clint Brawner and the successful Dean Van Lines team.

After making a few starts in Brawner’s front-engine roadster, the team unveiled its rear-engine Hawk for the 1965 Indianapolis 500. The car was modeled on a Brabham Formula 1 chassis and powered by the four-cam Ford V-8.

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Immediately comfortable in the rear-engine car, Andretti qualified fourth and finished third at Indy, claiming Rookie of the Year honors. He went on to score his first Indy car race win later that summer on the Indianapolis Raceway Park road course on the way to winning the overall USAC championship in his first year on the circuit.

Mario returned to Indianapolis in 1966 as a strong favorite and he took pole position by almost 2 mph. However, when the race was restarted after a first-lap accident, the Hawk's engine dropped a cylinder. Another Indianapolis pole in 1967 also preceded a bad race; a slipping clutch put Andretti six laps behind, and he ultimately dropped out when his car lost a wheel.

The bottom seemingly came in 1968, when Mario started fourth but suffered a blown engine on the first lap, placing him 33<sup>rd</sup> and last. But Andretti's Month of May 1969 started out even worse when his Lotus-Ford shed its right rear wheel in Turn 4 and he suffered a huge, fiery crash that left him nursing facial burns.

Andretti qualified his back-up Hawk-Ford in the middle of the front row and went on to score a relatively unchallenged win in the 500, leading home Dan Gurney and Bobby Unser.

"When I won it, it was only the second race that I finished there," he said. "I dominated more than once. I could have had won it so easily in 1966 and '67 because I had the car so quick. I was getting really frustrated, wondering what it was going to take. So when I crossed the finish line to win in '69, it was like a huge weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I thought, 'At least I've got that under my belt, and now we move on.'"

Andretti dominated the rest of the 1969 USAC season to earn his third Indy car championship in five years. But his luck soured in the 1970s, both at Indianapolis and with Indy cars in general. Later in the decade, he began to concentrate almost exclusively on Formula 1 with great success, winning 11 Grand Prix races and the 1978 World Championship. Andretti remains the last American to have won the F1 world title.

When Andretti finished the 500 during the '70s, he was generally near the front, with a sixth and a pair of eighths. But he also suffered five DNFs and skipped the 1979 race when it conflicted with the F1 Monaco Grand Prix.

Mario failed to finish in his return to Indianapolis in 1980, but a year later, he was involved in one of the most controversial decisions in the history of the Indy 500. Driving for Patrick Racing, Andretti finished second on the track behind Penske Racing's Bobby Unser. But Unser was observed illegally passing nine cars while he was leaving the pits during a caution period, so when the Official Results were posted the morning after the race, Andretti was declared the winner. Mario duly posed for a series of celebratory photographs.

Penske protested the revised result in which Unser was penalized a lap, and in October, Unser was reinstated as the winner of the 1981 Indianapolis 500. "The way the whole thing was handled politically left me with a sour taste," Andretti said.

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Keen to avenge his Indianapolis defeat, Andretti qualified fourth for the 1982 race, but was taken out by Kevin Cogan in the famous start line crash. He was eliminated from the 1983 race in another crash caused by Johnny Parsons. Andretti failed to finish the 500 in 1984, but he went on to win his fourth and final Indy car championship, this time under CART sanction.

The 1985 race would bring more heartbreak to Mario; he led 107 laps, but in the latter stages of the race, he was out-paced by Danny Sullivan – who had somehow regained control after spinning while trying to pass Andretti for the lead on Lap 120.

“Second means nothing here,” Andretti told reporters after the race. “I ran as hard as I could all day. I ran everything out of the car every lap. We just got smoked today.”

The legendary Andretti bad luck returned with a vengeance the next two years. Mario finished 32<sup>nd</sup> after lasting just 19 laps in 1986. The 1987 race brought true heartbreak, as Andretti led 170 of the first 177 laps. He had such a big lead that he backed off, but the reduced revs created a harmonic imbalance in his Ilmor/Chevrolet engine that led to a broken valve spring with 20 laps to go.

“I had them covered every day that month,” Andretti noted. “On race day, I was just gone. But it’s all part of the Indianapolis saga.”

For the rest of his Indianapolis career, Andretti alternated DNFs with strong runs, including finishes of fourth (1989), seventh (1991) and fifth (1993). His final Indy start in 1994 brought one last disappointment as PA Announcer Tom Carnegie once more got to utter the immortal line “Mario is slowing down!” when Andretti crept to a halt with fuel system issues after just 23 laps.

Andretti made headlines one more time as a driver at Indianapolis: While testing an Indy car for his son Michael’s team Andretti Green Racing in April 2003, Mario hit a piece of debris and the car was launched into a frightening flight. It bounced off the catch fence and landed right-side up, with the 63-year old driver reporting no injuries.

“What I hit wasn’t big, but it was solid and it was able to launch me,” he said. “Then all I saw was sky.”

On the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary running of the Indianapolis 500, Andretti reflected on his 45-year association with The Brickyard.

“I’ve made the statement before that the Indianapolis 500 is the only race in the world that probably has as much value as any championship,” he said. “That’s the reaction you get from all the people.

“The amazing thing is what the Speedway can do for you from a career standpoint. It’s almost unfair because you’re judged by your performance at Indy as a driver. Some of the drivers that

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should have won the “500” had things happen beyond their control and they are considered less highly because they didn’t win it. But that’s what Indy is all about. That’s how important it is, and that’s why there’s so much anxiety for anybody that competes there to be able to score and make their mark.”

<http://www.indianapolismotorspeedway.com/history/51458/>

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