

Most memorable Daytona 500s: Mario Andretti beats the odds

By: Al Pearce on February 22, 2012

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LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC - Mario Andretti's lone win in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series came in the 1967 Daytona 500 for Ford.

Editor's note: *We're counting down the days until the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series season-opening Daytona 500 on Feb. 26, and we'll feature one of our 10 most memorable 500s each day until the green flag waves on the 2012 season. In this installment, Autoweek NASCAR expert Al Pearce looks back on Mario Andretti's win at Daytona in 1967.*

It can be reasonably argued that Mario Andretti is the best driver to ever have won the Daytona 500.

While he did not have the longevity in NASCAR to be talked about among the greats in that series, and he may not have been the greatest Indy-car driver ever or even the top IROC racer to ever put on a helmet, when it's time to pick the best overall driver across all disciplines of the sport, it's hard to go against Andretti.

Against some daunting odds--after all, he'd made only six other NASCAR starts--he won stock-car racing's biggest event in February 1967. Before then, he had won USAC Champ car titles in 1965 and 1966 and would win another in 1969. He went on to win the 1978 Formula One World Championship, the 1979 IROC title and the 1984 CART Indy-car title.

Andretti is one of two men, along with A. J. Foyt, to win the Indy 500 and the Daytona 500. All told, his résumé shows 111 major wins on road courses and oval tracks.

Still, the 27-year-old Andretti was “that other guy” when Ford Racing sent him to Daytona International Speedway to join Fred Lorenzen on the potent Holman-Moody team. Noted engine builder Waddell Wilson was part of the crew, as were chassis experts Jake Elder and

team co-owner Ralph Moody. By any measure, Lorenzen was the driver Ford Racing expected and wanted to win the 500.

Andretti finished sixth in his 125-mile heat race and was 12th on the 500 grid. Although Holman-Moody and Ford Racing knew exactly what they had, few NASCAR fans knew or appreciated Andretti. Right from the start, it was obvious that he wasn't going to do things like the good ol' boys in the garage.

Against all reason, he told Elder and Moody that he wanted his No. 11 Ford as loose as they could get it. Most NASCAR drivers wanted their cars somewhat tight to keep the back from kicking out in the turns. But that's exactly what Andretti wanted--a car he could drive to the bottom of the high-banked corners on entry, then slide up near the outside wall on exit.

"He almost wrecked on every lap," Wilson said years later. "We thought he was a wreck just waiting to happen. I've never seen a driving performance like Mario put on that day. It was such a radical style, nobody ever expected him to finish. He was the class of the field."



LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC - Any discussion of the greatest driver of all-time has to include Mario Andretti.

Legendary motorsports journalist Chris Economaki described Andretti's line thusly: "He put his left wheel practically on the [flat] apron going into the corners and then let the right rear wheel almost brush the wall on exit. He was power-sliding clean across the corners twice a lap. It was so incredible nobody would get up there and run with him."

While the unbelieving media were taking odds on when he'd finally wear out his Firestones and crash, Andretti was leading eight times for a race-high 112 laps, including the final 33. Despite that overwhelming performance, he had to overcome a suspiciously slow last pit stop. He pitted at lap 163, well clear of Lorenzen at the time. But Andretti left the pits six seconds behind Lorenzen, who came in and left while Andretti's car was still on the jacks.

He's never openly accused Holman-Moody or Ford Racing of trying to sabotage him--Lorenzen, after all, was their fair-haired favorite son--but Andretti has intimated as much. A late-race

caution for Richard Petty's blown engine ended the race under caution, but it wouldn't have mattered, as Andretti was well clear of Lorenzen, with James Hylton, Tiny Lund and Jerry Grant rounding out the top-five.

Andretti made only seven more NASCAR starts (14 in all), his last in 1969. Along with 2011 winner Trevor Bayne, he remains the only driver whose only NASCAR win was the Daytona 500. But if you're only going to win one . . .

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