

## Grand Am: Mario Andretti reflects on his history with the Rolex 24 at Daytona



LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC

Andretti, driving at Daytona in 1989, recently talked about this year's upcoming season.

Published on 1/24/2012 on AutoWeek.com.

Famed driver Mario Andretti took time to talk to reporters in a teleconference on Tuesday afternoon to help promote this week's Rolex 24 at Daytona. Here is a transcript of the interview:

Moderator: Mario Andretti is another driver whose name is synonymous with the sport. He won the 1972 event in a factory Ferrari with Jacky Ickx and he's won the Indy 500, the Daytona 500 and [the] Formula One world championship. He debuted the Porsche 962 in the 1984 Rolex 24 at Daytona when he promptly put the car on the pole, and his son Michael co-drove in that race, and a couple years later he also drove a Porsche 962 with his sons Michael and Jeff. So Mario will not be participating this weekend, though his nephew John is going to be racing with his son, Jarett. So it's going to be quite an Andretti affair in the Rolex 24.

**Mario, welcome to our conference call to get ready for the 24 hours at Daytona. We talked a couple minutes ago about all the accomplishments you've had in your career and at the Rolex 24. What are your thoughts looking back as a leading Formula One and open-wheel driver when you came to Daytona to compete in the Rolex 24 at Daytona?**

**MARIO ANDRETTI:**

Well, Daytona, obviously when I--the first time I was there was in '66, I believe, and the race was not classic yet. It was not really established in the sense. I was fairly young. However, it was very welcome. I know that obviously you saw the involvement of all the factories that were there and so on and so forth. It was a huge field.

So the race became a big event immediately, and I was happy that I was invited to race there for Luigi Chinetti. It was a private Ferrari, along with Pedro Rodriguez. So it was a good beginning for me.

I was really trying to, basically, at that time, trying to get my feet wet in road racing, quite honestly, and this was a great opportunity, especially 24 hours. I think we wound up finishing top-five, fourth or something like that. So it was a good beginning for me.

And from there on, I always looked forward to every one of the events.

**Question : In '72 it was a factory effort with you and Jacky Ickx when you won the race.**

**MA :**

Yeah, indeed. '72 was a good year for us on many fronts with that particular car. It's amazing that we were on pole, and right at the start I dropped a cylinder. We were on 11 cylinders, but we just hung in there flat out, and our sister car was leading. I think it was the last hour or so, and we were running second, and they lost fourth gear, so we ran--both of us were limping somewhere, but we were able to overcome that and win. So it was a very satisfying win.

They all are, but whenever you have something that you have to overcome like that, it's always a little extra special.

**Q: Mario, you ran the very first Porsche 962, and I know the car was fast, but there was a couple problems that cost you a chance at winning the race with your son Michael. What do you recall about that race?**

**MA:**

Well, that was the introduction of the 962 in the States, and it was a derivative of the 956, and the difference was the 956 had twin turbos, and the '62 by IMSA rules was only allowed one turbo, and that's really what created the problem with us. The car was fast, put it on pole, and Michael was quite a rookie at that point, but he was really--he was quick. He was solid.

What happened is that with a single turbo, they put it right on top of the gearbox, and there wasn't enough heat shielding for the long distance, and in about--I don't know, we were only about a few hours into the race, the gearbox overheated, and it seized. And only because of the--like I said, the turbo created so much heat, and they underestimated that. So that was a shame because I think Mike and I could have probably walked that race.

**Q: You, Michael and Jeff had a very strong run a few years after that in the family Andretti car.**

**MA:**

Actually that was--I was looking up some of the statistics. I think that was the last race that I was in in 1991, I believe, and that was the three of us. I believe it was '91, right? Do you have any idea? I think it was.

Yeah, we had a good go, and here again, the turbo was pitching at the end there, so we didn't have a very good finish. But we had a good race throughout. We finished, but we finished somewhat in the mid-pack.

**Q: Mid-pack for Mario Andretti is fifth place overall. You were fifth overall and you were third GTP. That was the day that Hurley Haywood won his fifth Rolex 24.**

**MA:**

I'm not a statistician, not only on my own stuff.

**Q: But you know a lot about the cars you've driven. I know your nephew is going to be racing with his son Jarett this weekend in a Mazda RX-8 in the GT class. It's good to see John back. Have you talked to John at all?**

**MA:**

We talked briefly. It's great that John is really supporting Jarett all along the way and now driving with him. I think it's really admirable that he's doing that, and Jarett is really coming along well. The kid is running strong in midgets and

so forth, and now he's doing the right thing, obviously expanding into road racing, so he's going to have a very good feel for the overall side of the sport.

I love to see that, the versatility.

**Q: What do you think of the way the field has grown over the years, and now we've got all the new Daytona Prototypes, and we've got a large number of GT cars, 46 of them with the brand-new Ferrari especially built for the Grand-Am, a brand-new Audi and a number of other cars, so I think it's going to be one of the most competitive Rolex 24s since back in the '80s.**

**MA:**

I agree. It's awesome. The great thing about today, too, the cars are so reliable, so you're going to have probably 98 percent of the field running at the end. It always makes for a hell of a race like that, and as you said, with all the new equipment, factories involved, the new Corvette there and the Grand-Am class, it's actually worthy of the 50th anniversary, no question.

**Q: What I want to know is out of all your racing experience, how big is seeing that sports car win at Daytona? Does that sort of round out your résumé as far as being a race car driver?**

**MA:**

Well, I'd like to think that all wins are important, and where I put a lot of stock was on being able to win outside of my sandbox, if you will. My specialty was open-wheel cars, and then when I got into sports cars, winning there, it was to me extra special. So it falls into that category.

And then, of course, look at Daytona, the 24 hours, that event has become a classic now, so it gives it even that much more weight, to be able to have your name in the winning column. So again, every win is precious in its own way, and this one certainly carries its own weight.

**Q: Your record at Daytona with winning the 500 and winning the sports-car race and everything, that really stands out when you look at your record, your success at Daytona.**

**MA:**

I love Daytona, quite honestly. I did--I was involved in a lot of the testing, which was really good for me with Ford when they were developing the Mark IIs and Mark IVs that were so successful. I mean, we had run a simulated 24 hours, and we were there like weeks and weeks testing and testing. You know, I didn't do a lot of races. Obviously I was busy in IndyCars and Formula One, but whenever I had the opportunity to race there with IROC or NASCAR a few times, I felt pretty confident. You know, I certainly knew those banks and the road course, as well. So I always felt good there.

My events there, I consider that a real privilege to have had the opportunity. Quite honestly it's a fabulous venue, and of course you could see that the popularity of it now, I think it makes it all that much more important for me to have had some good experiences there.

**Q: I just wanted to find out, what do you think is your most memorable or unusual Rolex that you've been in? Is there one that stands out? I don't know if it's the one that you won or if there is an unusual situation that happened.**

**MA:**

Well, the ones that obviously we had the good results, and I've had a couple of good ones there, are very important. But now that you mention it, to be racing there, I raced there with my nephew John as a teammate, Michael, and then the last race that I did there with a Porsche 962 was with both my sons, Jeff and Mike, and you know, when you have those opportunities, I mean, these are things that you can never really predict that could ever happen. But when it does, you savor that. When you look back at that, I see how sweet it was to be together like that. So those are memorable moments that I cherish very, very much.

**Q: Mario, correct me if I'm wrong, but this year NASCAR made the announcement that they'll be running a Rolex race at Indy. If so, will you be there for that race, and if you are, what kind of feelings and emotions will be going through you getting back to that Indy track?**

**MA:**

Well, you know, going back to Indy, I go back every year, obviously, and I assume the race--I think I have some idea when they're going to be running it. Say, if my grandson Marco or someone like that has the opportunity to be involved, I might go there and watch.

But you know, I go to Indy for the 500, and actually I do some driving myself with a two-seater car, which I really enjoy. So I'm at Indy every year. You know, that's one of the classics that certainly I want to be part of for the rest of my days.

**Q: Of all the times you've run the Rolex 24, what was your favorite race car?**

**MA:**

Well, the ones that you win usually, but actually when I look back, my favorite car was the first one, the 962 Porsche. That was really an awesome car, you know, in its day. It was the middle '80s and so forth, and it was very sophisticated and very fast and really fun to drive.

But then, having said that, I had so much experience with the Ford, the GT cars, which in its day they were just phenomenal. You look at the record they had. So I don't know, I'm waffling around quite honestly because I had a lot of good cars there, a lot of satisfaction.

But what stands out is these two cars, the Ford and the Porsche. Then while I'm saying this, I remember the Ferrari, the 512, you know. I sat on pole there with a Ferrari, I sat on pole with the 312, the 512 and the Porsche, and whenever you're that fast, the car is good. So that's what dictates what you really love, what you fall in love with.

Read more: [http://www.autoweek.com/article/20120124/GRAND\\_AM/120129920#ixzz1lidiDjUq](http://www.autoweek.com/article/20120124/GRAND_AM/120129920#ixzz1lidiDjUq)