

RETRO: Mario Andretti, World Champion - Part 2, Winning the Title

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September 10 2013

racer.com

Today marks the 35th anniversary of Mario Andretti becoming Formula 1 World Champion. In part 1, we looked at the first two seasons of the Andretti-Lotus combo. Now, David Malsher chronicles that title-winning year, and seeks to clarify some misconceptions.



The Lotus 79 first tested in winter of 1977 in the hands of Ronnie Peterson. Its creators – Colin Chapman, Geoff Aldridge, Martin Ogilvie, Tony Rudd and Peter Wright – were rightly proud of their new baby, but discovered that so great was its suction effect, it needed strengthening. It produced an estimated 30 percent more downforce than the 78!

The older car had always looked a little untidy at the rear, its sidepods, bodywork and floor ending almost simultaneously, *ahead* of the rear wheels. The 79, by contrast, stretched the shaped underbody back to between the rear wheels, and the sidepods now tucked in Coke-bottle style between those big wide crossplies, as part of far more all-enveloping rear bodywork. This, naturally, moved the center of pressure backward, making the car far more balanced, and therefore able to run a smaller rear wing than its predecessor. At a stroke, the 78's main flaw had been fixed.

The result was visually stunning, and the Lotus 79 was quickly dubbed “Black Beauty” by the media. Given its far lower profile behind the cockpit, it was always going to look years ahead of its rivals which still reflected the shapes borne from the tall airbox era. But the car would prove that its aesthetic appeal was matched by its effectiveness as a racecar.

Not yet though. The monocoque still needed to be stiffened, and Chapman had also got sidetracked trying to replace the Hewland 5-speed gearbox with the smaller Lotus/Getrag sequential system. With the 1978 season starting in the middle of January, the old 78 would suffice, and this wasn't envisaged as a problem, given that several other teams – including their likely championship opponents – would adopt a similar policy of running their 1977 cars in the early rounds.

Mario Andretti, meanwhile, the guy who had scored four wins and seven poles the previous year, was fired up and ready to go. He'd been reassured by Chapman that Peterson would be his number two, with all that entails, but Andretti had no intention of having his teammate run ahead of him for 99 percent of a race, and then move aside on the last lap. Mario had too much pride for that nonsense, didn't want anyone thinking he was a less than deserving winner. Yes, he reasoned, there would be days when Ronnie's freestyle artistry would prevail but, race in and race out, Mario was determined to be Lotus's main man in terms of pace as well as priority.



If, in retrospect, people are puzzled why Peterson meekly accepted the No. 2 role, especially given that he entered the season with eight career F1 wins to Andretti's five, it's important that they see it from SuperSwede's perspective. After just one win in three seasons, Ronnie was no longer perceived as the rising star he'd once appeared to be when he took four wins and finished third in the 1973 championship. Instead, he was seen as mercurial, a guy who was the quickest but only when in the right mood, and that mood had seldom taken him in the previous three years. Now all he needed was something fast (unlike his Lotus 72 of 1975), something reliable (unlike his March 761 in '76) and something with no more wheels than necessary (unlike his Tyrrell P34 of '77). Being a No. 2 in the best car was better than being No. 1 in mediocre machinery. It was as simple as that.

Andretti would come to realize that Peterson was a man of integrity, a man of his word, and they would become firm friends. But that didn't lessen his desire to mash the Swede. And neither of them were arrogant enough to expect everything their own way. Strong opposition was expected from Ferrari (as ever), whose Michelin radials were as much of an unknown quantity as their driver lineup, the moody but superquick Carlos Reutemann and the highly promising rookie Gilles Villeneuve. And Brabham would surely be a consistent force because (a) it usually was, (b) designer Gordon Murray was sure to draw up something innovative and fast around that Alfa-Romeo flat-12 engine, and (c) because its drivers were the fast and canny Niki Lauda and the fast but unlucky and occasionally outpsyched John Watson. Preseason, other teams that seemed likely to threaten for wins were McLaren (James Hunt and rookie Patrick Tambay), Tyrrell (Patrick Depailler and Didier Pironi), Wolf (Jody Scheckter) and Ligier (Jacques Laffite).

Some of those predictions would prove inaccurate, but the expectation that Lotus would be the strongest force was spot on. So how was the championship won?

Round 1 – ARGENTINA, Buenos Aires, January 15

Andretti – Q1, F1

Not quite as easy as it sounds...Oh, who are we kidding? Mario ran and hid from the opposition, leading every lap. The Ferrari challenge looked strong, with the old 312T2 having been transformed by the switch to Michelin, but the poor choice of a harder compound sent front-row starter Reutemann scurrying to the pits for softer tires, by which time he was outside the points. Brabham looked strong, Lauda taking over from Watson in second place when the Irishman's engine blew. An understeering Peterson qualified third, but was never a contender for a podium finish on race day, coming home fifth.

Points after 1 round – Andretti 9, Lauda 6, Depailler 4, Hunt 3, Peterson 2, Tambay 1

Round 2 – BRAZIL, Interlagos, January 29

Andretti – Q3, F4

Reutemann chose the right compound, and from fourth on the grid disappeared into a race of his own. Polesitter Peterson was pleased to outqualify Andretti (who was held up by traffic as he embarked on his final flyer) but again troubled by understeer was passed by his teammate on lap 7, and faded until being run into by Villeneuve. Andretti looked set fair for second, until struck by gear selection issues, which allowed through Emerson Fittipaldi's unusually swift Copersucar and Lauda's Brabham.

Points after 2 rounds – Andretti 12, Lauda 10, Reutemann 9, Fittipaldi 6, Depailler 4, Hunt 3

Round 3 – SOUTH AFRICA, Kyalami, March 05

Andretti – Q2, F7

For Mario, practice and qualifying were troubled by mechanical ailments which forced him to switch to the less than perfect spare car, which he nonetheless put on the front row alongside Lauda. Ronnie would start 12th, after wasting his Friday (as usual) trying to use the Lotus gearbox and then discovering he, too, had handling issues.

In the race, Andretti led but when he found his car to be using its left-front tire too fast he cut the pace and dropped as far as fifth. Nonetheless, he and Peterson looked set for a Lotus 2-3 finish when, four laps from the end, Mario ran out of fuel and had to pit. Peterson hunted down leader Depailler and barged through to win when the Tyrrell driver, too, had a fuel-starvation moment.

Worth noting is that at this race, Brabham and Ferrari introduced their definitive 1978 cars, the BT46 and 312T3, respectively. Lotus would give its 79s their race debut at the non-championship International Trophy at Silverstone a couple weeks later. In monsoon conditions, both cars crashed.

Points after 3 rounds – Andretti 12, Peterson 11, Lauda 10, Depailler 10, Reutemann 9, Fittipaldi 6



Round 4 – USA WEST, Long Beach, April 02

Andretti – Q4, F2

Not quite the glory of the year before for Mario. Once the Brabhams accounted for themselves, Andretti spent much of the race in fourth, behind the Ferrari pair and the well-driven Williams of Alan Jones, again nursing his front tires having elected to go for a narrow tire of soft compound. He moved up to second when Jones hit engine trouble and Villeneuve hit a curb, then Clay Regazzoni's car and a wall. Depailler took third, while Peterson had to make a pit stop after flat-spotting his front tires before charging back to finish fourth.

Points after 4 rounds – Reutemann 18, Andretti 18, Peterson 14, Depailler 14, Lauda 10, Fittipaldi 6.

Round 5 – MONACO, Monte Carlo, May 07

Andretti – Q4, F11

Mario tried the Lotus 79 in practice, and was confident that, given time, it could have been quicker around the twisty street circuit, but the 78 was his more trusted ally, despite understeer restricting his pace. On race day an unobtrusive run to fourth was interrupted three times by recurrent fuel-metering problems, teammate Peterson suffered gearbox failure, and chief rival Reutemann squandered his pole position with a slow start and was tapped into a spin resulting in a puncture and a finish outside the points. First-time winner Depailler led Lauda, Scheckter and Watson to the checker.

Points after 5 rounds – Depailler 23, Reutemann 18, Andretti 18, Lauda 16, Peterson 14, Watson 7

Round 6 – BELGIUM, Zolder, May 21

Andretti – Q1, F1

The Lotus 79's championship race debut...and Mario on pole by eight-tenths of a second, and then scored a lights-to-flag victory. Job done. Ronnie, still using a 78, qualified 1.7sec down, ran third for most of the day, and despite a pit stop to replace a worn left front, charged back to finish second. New Lotus beat old Lotus beat the Ferraris of Reutemann and Villeneuve.

Points after 6 rounds – Andretti 27, Depailler 23, Reutemann 22, Peterson 20, Lauda 16, Watson 7

Round 7 – SPAIN, Jarama, June 04

Andretti – Q1, F1

Mario took pole by 0.3sec ahead of Ronnie (now in a 79) and a full second clear of third-placed Reutemann. Hunt briefly led at the start, but Andretti got around him on lap 6 and led to the end. Peterson dropped to ninth at the start having been caught out by the green light, but picked his way through to second. The second Lotus 1-2 in two weeks. Reutemann crashed out with a stuck throttle.

Points after 7 rounds – Andretti 36, Peterson 26, Depailler 23, Reutemann 22, Lauda 16, Jacques Laffite 10



Round 8 – SWEDEN, Anderstorp, June 17

Andretti – Q1, R

Andretti was on pole for a third straight race, almost 0.7sec quicker than the opposition, but the new Brabham BT46B “fan cars” were hiding their pace by qualifying (second and third) with full fuel loads. Lauda effortlessly stuck to the tail of the lead Lotus on race day, before slipping ahead after a rare error from Andretti who simply could not keep pace with the fan car thereafter. Then Andretti's engine blew 23 laps from home. After handling difficulties and then a puncture and pit stop dropped him to 17th, Peterson charged back to take third just behind the Arrows of Riccardo Patrese. The Ferraris, meanwhile suffered tire problems all weekend and finished well outside the top six.

Points after 8 rounds – Andretti 36, Peterson 30, Lauda 25, Depailler 23, Reutemann 22, Laffite 10



Round 9 – FRANCE, Paul Ricard, July 02

Andretti – Q2, F1

Despite Brabham's "fan cars" being banned, the power of their Alfa-Romeo flat-12 helped equalize performance at Ricard, with Brabhams clocking first and third fastest times in qualifying, but Andretti was ahead of Watson by the end of lap 1 and was never headed thereafter. Peterson damaged his front wing and sidepod trying to pass Lauda and could not get within striking distance of his teammate, instead focusing on successfully holding off Hunt's McLaren to the checkered flag. And yet again, no points for tire-troubled Ferrari.

Points after 9 rounds – Andretti 45, Peterson 36, Lauda 25, Depailler 23, Reutemann 22, Watson 12

Round 10 – BRITAIN, Brands Hatch, July 16

Andretti – Q2, R

For only the second time of the season, Peterson was the quicker Lotus driver. In fact, he was sensational, taking pole by a quarter-second using race tire, as Andretti wasted time and rubber using qualifying tires. At the green light, Andretti grabbed the lead, but it was all irrelevant, as both cars would retire with a broken fuel line (RP) and a blown engine for Mario. Reutemann pressured Lauda into an error in the closing stages, winning what he described as the best race of his life. Now, despite his Michelin-induced problems in recent races, Carlos had put himself back into title contention.

Points after 10 rounds – Andretti 45, Peterson 36, Reutemann 31, Lauda 31, Depailler 26, Watson 16

Round 11 – GERMANY, Hockenheim, July 30

Andretti – Q1, F1

The endless straights of Hockenheim had hurt the Lotus 78s a year earlier, relegating them to seventh and ninth on the grid. The aero efficiency of the 79 changed all that; despite Andretti not being 100 percent happy with his handling and Peterson suffering a suspension failure when he looked likely to take a second straight pole, the black and gold cars wrapped up the front row. Peterson, with a new more powerful Nicholson-tuned Cosworth, briefly led, but Andretti passed his teammate on lap 5 and the pair of them disappeared into their own race. Ronnie suffered

gearbox failure in the closing stages, and Mario ran untroubled to the finish, with no other title contenders in the top six.

Points after 11 rounds – Andretti 54, Peterson 36, Reutemann 31, Lauda 31, Depailler 26, Watson 16

Round 12 – AUSTRIA, Osterreichring, August 13

Andretti – Q2 , R

Beaten to pole by 0.05sec and his teammate, Mario lost out to Reutemann at the start. Light rain had been falling but all cars were on slicks. Impatient to be past the Ferrari driver before Peterson could make a break, Andretti tried an optimistic pass on the outside of a fast right-hander. Reutemann held his line and so the Lotus drifted off onto the grass and into the barriers. Furious at himself, Andretti could only watch as Peterson won ahead of Depailler and Villeneuve.

Points after 12 rounds – Andretti 54, Peterson 45, Depailler 32, Reutemann 31, Lauda 31, Watson 16, Laffite 16



Round 13 – HOLLAND, Zandvoort, August 28

Andretti – Q1, F1

Mario set arguably his finest pole position of the year, 0.6sec clear of Peterson who was, admittedly, troubled by traffic. This was the one race where Ronnie could have feasibly beaten Mario, since his team leader had a broken exhaust and was thus losing some 500rpm. SuperSwede got anxious in his attempts to ride shotgun as Lauda closed in, but when Niki's car picked up strange vibrations, and could threaten them no more, Peterson stopped fretting. Afterward, it transpired that he had run out of rear brakes, too. (That could have made a fascinating battle – a Lotus that couldn't go properly vs. a Lotus that couldn't stop properly...) The Lotus pair crossed the line just a couple of tenths apart.

Points after 13 rounds – Andretti 63, Peterson 51, Lauda 35, Depailler 32, Reutemann 31, Watson 19

Round 14 – ITALY, Monza, September 10

Andretti – Q1, F6

The Lotus duo were separated by just 12 points and there being three races to go, and nine points available for a win, a maximum of 27 points was still on the table. Since both Andretti and Peterson had retired twice, the confusing and frankly unjust rule, whereby drivers could count only their best seven results from each eight-race half of the season, would not come into effect. That meant fans didn't need a degree in math nor a degree of meth to understand the championship permutations. If Mario left Monza with an 18-point lead or greater, he had the title in his pocket, thus a win for Andretti would require Peterson to at least finish on the podium to keep the title alive into the North American rounds. Should Ronnie score no points, then Mario needed only a second-place to become World Champion.

The tension that Andretti had felt following his no-score at Austria had been eased somewhat by victory in Zandvoort, and it wasn't just a case of getting back to the center step of the podium. That race had also shown the depth of Peterson's integrity, for he had strictly adhered to team orders, and not made a passing attempt on his team leader.

In the week leading up to the event, *AUTOSPORT* magazine had carried an interview with Peterson in which, although he admitted that he'd want equal number one status with Andretti in 1979 or he'd leave for another team, and although he enjoyed having the clear edge on his team leader in Austria, he said he found the discussion of team orders quite unnecessary. "I have not helped Mario to get his points," said Peterson. "Team orders haven't come into it because the situation has always worked itself out. In the races where I have finished second, I could not have beaten him anyway – it would hardly have made any difference who was number one and who was number two."

Elsewhere, Ronnie was quoted as saying: “Mario deserves to win the championship this year because he was far ahead of me in the first half of the season,” and certainly he knew that Andretti was one of the cornerstones to the Lotus revival in the past three seasons.



So Andretti had ceased to worry about Peterson's ultimate intentions. They'd hung out together between races, both in Peterson's pad in Berkshire, UK, and at Andretti's estate in Nazareth, Pa., and they were true friends. What concerned Mario was the possibility of screwing up or suffering mechanical issues. As he said, if his car broke down in a race, he could hardly expect Ronnie to dutifully follow him into retirement.

Chapman had brought three Lotus 79s and a 78 to Monza. As No. 1 driver, Mario's spare was a 79 while Ronnie had the 78 as his backup. He was obliged to switch to the older model on Friday as the engine broke in his primary car, and in qualifying on Saturday, now back in his 79, a balky gearbox and (again) rear brake issues, restricted Peterson to fifth on the grid. Meanwhile, Andretti had a relatively trouble-free run to pole, joined on the front row by Villeneuve's Ferrari. Peterson then also had a shunt in the Sunday morning warm-up, obliging him to race with the 78.

At the start, there was chaos on the run to the first chicane where the Monza track funneled the 26 cars, with too many drivers trying to occupy the same piece of pavement at the same time. The jostling pack spat out Lotus No. 6 and it struck the barriers with a great impact and a blinding flash. Ronnie was taken to hospital with severe leg injuries and the track was cleared.

After a long delay, the race was restarted, but Andretti and Villeneuve were judged to have jumped the green lights, and though the Lotus and Ferrari crossed the finish line first and second respectively, they had a minute added on to their race time, which relegated them to sixth and seventh and handed Brabham a 1-2 finish for Lauda and Watson.

Frustrated by this and gutted by what had happened to Peterson, Andretti was in no mood to celebrate winning the title that meant more to him than any other. Finally when word came from the hospital that Peterson, though likely to have to convalesce for considerable time out of racing for a long time, would be OK, Mario felt able to smile a little and look back on the season as a job well done. His joy was short-lived.

Early next morning, Emerson Fittipaldi called Mario to inform him that Ronnie had taken a turn for the worse. Mario and wife Dee Ann rushed to Niguarda Hospital, where a mutual friend told them that SuperSwede had died. Bone marrow had gotten into his bloodstream, resulting in a pulmonary embolism. Quizzed for his thoughts, Mario told reporters, "Unhappily, racing is also this." As when Billy Foster was killed in 1967 and Lucien Bianchi in '69, Andretti had lost a colleague who he hadn't just gotten along with, who he hadn't just respected for his talents, but who he had regarded as a true friend.

Points after 14 rounds – Andretti 64, Peterson 51, Lauda 44, Reutemann 35, Depailler 32, Watson 19, Laffite 19

There would be no more points for Andretti in '78. The graffiti painted on the track at **Watkins Glen**, the next race, implored him to win the race for Ronnie, but brought him no luck. He took pole by a full second but after a stub axle failure caused him to crash in Sunday morning warm-up, he took over temporary teammate Jean-Pierre Jarier's car for the race. This machine had a major oversteer issue and eventually its engine blew.

And in Canada, at the new circuit in **Montreal**, he just could not get his car to work, even if Peterson's sub, Jean-Pierre Jarier could, taking pole position and leading for much of the way. Andretti made progress from ninth on the grid, then collided with Watson and eventually struggled home 10th.

Two weeks later, a fourth racing friend died. Gunnar Nilsson, his Lotus teammate through 1976 and '77, lost his battle with cancer. In all but ultimate achievement, it had been a pretty rancid end to the season for the new World Champion.

So, what to make of Andretti's World Championship? Well, it seems perplexing that he still doesn't get his due. He had a car advantage, yes, but he had been key to developing that advantage. And it took until the 10th round of the season for the guy who so many regarded as the fastest driver in Formula 1 to gain an edge, to fathom the complexities of the Lotus 79, learn how to exploit it.

Much is made, too, of the occasions when Peterson used hard race tires rather than soft tires to get within a few tenths of Mario in qualifying, or eclipse him on rare occasions. But the truth is that Ronnie's exuberant style would cook the softer compounds all too rapidly, sometimes before the end of his single flying lap, so spending more time on track with the harder tires was just his arguably advantageous way of going about his Saturday afternoon business. Andretti sought the same goal but came from a different angle, turned his car in at shallower angles, and made the softer rubber work. Both in qualifying and on race day, his neater style kept his tires alive longer.

And what allowed him to adopt that neater style was his painstaking work on tire stagger and crossweighting, specifically tailoring his car for a given track, lessons learned from his many years racing Indy cars. Like Alain Prost and Jenson Button after him, and Jimmy Clark and Jackie Stewart before him, Mario was of the firm belief that making the car do the work was vital to putting less strain on the tires and driver, leaving capacity within both to produce that extra something should it be required at any point during the race. Yet when it wasn't feasible to have the car at this pitch, Andretti still knew how to carry it (see Monaco) and do so at least as well as Peterson, the king of improvisation, the guy renowned for being able to drive around a car's defects.

It seems absurd to have to defend Mario Andretti, but sweeping generalizations about car advantages and misguided perceptions regarding team orders ignored the reality then and obscure the truth now. So, happy 35th anniversary to Mario Andretti, a thoroughly deserving World Champion.

<http://www.racer.com/retro-mario-andretti-world-champion--part-2-winning-the-title/article/311007/>