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### **The Name of American Racing: Andretti**

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Mario Andretti in the 1977 U.S. Grand Prix West.

*Sutton Motorsports/Zuma Press*

The official ambassador for Sunday's Formula One U.S. Grand Prix in Austin, Texas (NBC, 2 p.m. ET) is a fellow you may have heard of. His name is Mario Andretti. It's probably fair to say that no driver from any nation in the world has enough fame to compare.

Andretti's racing career, which ran from 1959 to 2000, coincided with a forceful collision between the surging popularity of global motor sport and the steady advance of television. As the cameras rolled, Andretti won just about everything you can win on wheels—most notably the F1 world championship, the most coveted title of all, which he claimed 35 years ago.

No driver from the U.S. has won an F1 race since and there will be no Americans on Sunday's grid.

"Grandmothers in rural Kansas know Mario's name, but more importantly, so do grandmothers in rural Japan and Germany," said Sam Smith, executive editor of Road & Track. "How many American athletes are on a first-name basis with the rest of the world?"

Andretti rarely invites journalists into his home in Nazareth, Penn. Inside, however, the place seems to have brought the entire world inside. Every room is filled with artifacts that represent some scene from the Andretti saga, from his childhood as a war refugee to the present.



Andretti in his home with the F1 World Championship trophy.

*Jeff Zelevansky for The Wall Street Journal*

In the sports bar built into the bottom floor, the 73-year old former racing driver keeps a tribute to the town in Italy where he was born—Montona, which is part of Croatia today. The humble shrine could fit in a shoe box. And yet, you could scour the nation and fail to find a more potent symbol of the American dream. "It's my little shrine," Andretti said in an interview at the home this summer. "It signifies why I am in the United States, where I came from, and our plight as a family, affected directly by World War II."

From the drawings of Montona to the trophy case upstairs, his house is as much an autobiography as a piece of architecture, the symbol of a boy who had everything taken and who spent his life winning it all back.

A few feet from the Montona shrine is a heavy wooden door, behind which is the wine cellar. Andretti owns a winery in Napa, and the cellar in his home contains bottles older than he is. The grape signifies the beginning of his story. Before World War II, his father owned 2,100 acres in Italy. "He was a grower of grapes," Andretti said. "He was basically a farmer, and grapes were a big part of it."

At the end of the war, Yugoslavia occupied Montona, and a communist government took over. "My father lost everything," Andretti said. The family was displaced to a refugee camp in Lucca, a town in Tuscany, where Andretti grew up. And this is where things started to move quickly—literally.

At a garage in Lucca, Mario and his twin brother Aldo learned to drive by parking cars. "I could hardly reach the pedals," said Andretti, who was around 12 at the time. "We were buzzing wheels and doing burnouts. Those poor customers!" While living in Lucca, Andretti went to the 1954 Italian Grand Prix at Monza. "My idol, Alberto Ascari, was driving for Ferrari," Andretti said. "We were

mesmerized. That's when the mold was cast, the dreams of a young child. It all seemed to happen that day."

The family emigrated to the U.S. a year later, settling in Nazareth. As a teenager, he was working in a gas station when he and his brother hatched the idea to build a race car from a Hudson Hornet. They borrowed \$500 from the bank and got fake IDs. (They were 19 at their first race; the legal age for racing was 21.)

"We had no formal training," he said. "It was the school of hard knocks. You dream what you're supposed to do. And you don't accept failure—because you can't afford it."

Bob Dance, who later served as Andretti's chief mechanic, remembered seeing the racer as a rookie at the Indy 500 in 1965. "He was this slim little lad from Pennsylvania," Dance said. "He was just a terrific talent."

Now, decades later, the trophy case in Andretti's home tells the rest of the story. He won the Daytona 500 (1967), the Indy 500 (1969), the 12 Hours of Sebring (three times), the IndyCar title (four times), and any number of dirt track and sports car races. Andretti's F1 debut was with the Lotus team at the 1968 U.S. Grand Prix at Watkins Glen, N.Y. Dance was his mechanic. "Before the race, Mario asked, 'Do you want me to put the car on pole?'" said Dance. "And he did just that. In his first race!" He went on to win 12 F1 races.

If there's a defining moment in the Andretti story, it occurred at the Italian Grand Prix in 1978—at the same track where he first dreamed of becoming a champion. He and his Lotus teammate, Ronnie Peterson of Sweden, arrived as rivals for the F1 title. Andretti placed sixth—enough to clinch—but it came at a cost: Peterson crashed horribly on the first lap. Andretti recalls the next day driving to the hospital. A tollbooth operator recognized him and told him Peterson had died. It was on the radio.

"I couldn't believe it," Andretti recalled. "You lose your buddy at one of the best moments of your life."

Today, the F1 championship trophy—a simple silver bowl—sits among the others in Andretti's home. At Sunday's U.S. Grand Prix, he will greet fans from many nations, his silver hair brushed back as if blown by a steady breeze. He'll be a spectator when the checkered flag waves—many miles from Montona.

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