



MILLER: Mario Andretti at 75

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Robin Miller / Images: Steve Shunck, Dan Boyd, IMS archives, Robin Miller
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That wild kid they used to send Christmas cards in July – because they knew he'd never live to see December – turns 75 on Saturday. "Mario tickled the devil lots of times," says Bobby Unser with a chuckle. "He was a loose wire, kinda reckless, like a lot of us were. And I thought back then that 25 would be way too old for him to ever see. But I'm glad he drove through everything and made it. He made it big."

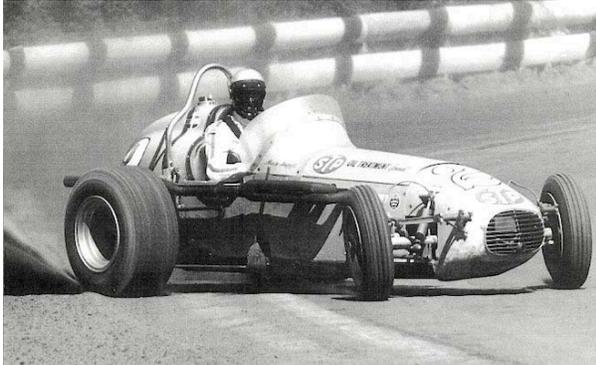
Did he ever.

Mario Andretti smoothed out and became one of the greatest, most diverse and accomplished racers ever. Formula 1 king in 1978, Indy 500 winner in 1969, four-time Indy car champion, Daytona 500 victor in



1967, three times P1 in the Sebring 12 Hours and the only driver to win an Indy car race in four different decades.

He ruffled a few feathers (A.J. Foyt, Don Branson and Lloyd Ruby) on his way up but there was never any question of his amazing abilities.



“Yeah, he drove hard and he could be tough on equipment but I thought he was good the first time I saw him and he just kept getting better,” says Parnelli Jones, who raced against and then employed Andretti on his "Super Team" in the 1970s. “He had great car control and a lot of talent and I always liked him because he came up the hard way like I did.”

From jalopies to midgets to USAC sprints to the Dean Van Lines roadster in only four years was quite the ascension because car owners tended not to trust young race drivers.

Jim McGee was working for Clint Brawner and the revered Dean Van Lines team in 1964 when longtime USAC sprint car owner Rufus Gray paid them a visit. “Rufus said we needed to hire this Andretti kid so Clint and I went to Terre Haute,” recalls McGee. “I think he was putting on an extra show because we were there but Clint liked him right away.





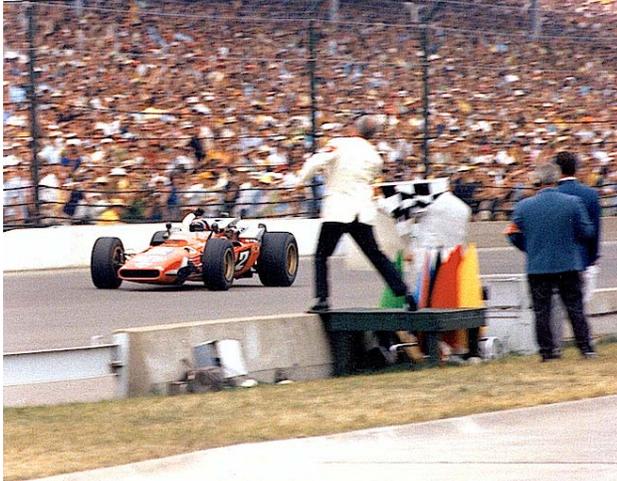
“We’d missed the show at Indy that year with our roadster and tried several guys in it but the only person to make it go fast was Rodger Ward and he didn’t like it. So we went testing at Trenton, Mario spun and we asked Ward to try it again, which he did.

“He didn’t run as fast as Mario and he came in and said: ‘That’s the bravest kid alive because this car is wicked and he’s something else.’ So we ran him the rest of the season and he did a helluva job.”

Dan Gurney [RIGHT with Gordon Johncock and Mario], one of the guys Andretti wanted to emulate because of his Formula 1 prowess, was asked to give his initial impression of the skinny little Italian descendant that blasted into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1965.

“I hated him from the start!” declares Gurney, bursting into laughter. “He was on Firestones and I was on Goodyears. No, I had a lot of respect for Mario from the beginning. I’d read the reviews on him and I knew he’d been tire testing and usually that bodes well. He was very impressive as a rookie.”





Off that third place rookie run at Indy in '65, Andretti earned the first of his four national titles but was snake bit at Indianapolis in 1966-67-68.

“I was sitting in Turn 4 watching Mario practice in the Lotus four-wheel drive car in 1969 and saw him crash,” continued Gurney. “When he climbed out of the car I said, ‘Now he’s going to get rid of that car and get back in his old one and he’s going to win the race.’”

the fact he’d wind up leading 556 laps at IMS, that was Andretti’s lone visit to Victory Lane at the Speedway.

The Big Eagle’s prediction came true but, despite

From there, he continued to run dirt cars, sports cars, Formula 5000 and F1 while working in as many Indy car races as possible. His collaboration with Colin Chapman and Lotus was magic and Mario became only the second – and last – American to be F1 king in '78. He owned the 1981 Indy 500 for a few months before USAC reversed its decision and awarded it back to the original winner, Unser, which strained their great friendship of 20 years.



“You couldn’t have a better friendship than I did with Mario and, for sure, 1981 did some damage,” says the three-time Indy winner. “But it doesn’t take away from the fact he was always good and he was always fast. He was fast in the beginning and fast right up until the end, even though he drove until he was blind.”

McGee remembers Branson being irate when Mario took him out of a race and the time they had to smuggle him out of Ascot Park in the bed of a pickup truck after Andretti roughed up a few of the locals in a sprint show.



“A lot of people never thought he’d make it because he was a little wild so that’s where the ‘Christmas card in July’ thing started. But, as we know now, he turned out to be one of the best ever.”



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