

Driving With Mario Andretti, Who at 76, Still Refuses to Slow Down

The country's only living World Champion on speed, Indianapolis, and why he still rips laps at 240 mph.

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Photo by Andrew Trahan

BY SAM SMITH

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MARIO ANDRETTI WAS BORN IN MONTONA, ITALY, in February of 1940. In 1955, he immigrated to America with his parents. In 1959, he began racing stock cars in his home state of Pennsylvania. More than half a century later, he is one of the most successful drivers in history, to say nothing of a mononymic cultural legend who needs no introduction.

Still, few résumés are this much fun to rattle off: Daytona 500 winner, 1967. Indy 500 winner, 1969. Formula 1 world champion, 1978—one of just two Americans to win the title. Four-time IndyCar champion. Factory driver for Ford, Lotus, Ferrari. A Sebring winner who's stood on the podium at Le Mans. The all-time leader in IndyCar pole positions, all-time IndyCar lap leader, and a man the Associated Press named Driver of the Century.

"THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING. IF YOU DON'T CHALLENGE YOURSELF EVERY TIME OUT THERE, YOU'RE NOT DOING YOUR JOB."

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We met Andretti shortly before the 100th running of the Indianapolis 500, at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. With some help from a longtime sponsor, Firestone, he procured a two-seat IndyCar chassis, an extended-wheelbase Dallara based on the customer race car used in the old Indy Racing League. I belted into the second seat, not least because it was there. And then proceeded to have a 600-plus-hp, 3.5-liter Honda V-8 bore a hole in my skull for two laps of Indy's infield road course.

We spoke in a trailer in the paddock shortly before those laps. Climbing out of the car after, I asked Andretti how much he held in reserve for drives like this. "That's pretty much all there is," he said. And then one of the sport's last great gentlemen smiled, hair tousled by the breeze, and strolled off, not slowly, to catch a flight.



Andrew Trahan

Sam Smith: Good Lord, it's a pleasure to meet you. So many things I want to ask, but this car—a basic design more than a decade old—got my mind turning. You've seen a lot of tides change in this business. How important is it for racing to push tech boundaries? F1 and Indy grew prominent by redefining the possible, but the sport has never been more shackled by regulation.

Mario Andretti: Let's put it this way: Today, you cannot function without the technical aspect of what the world has to offer. The sport thrives on that. The big problem is, how do you maintain the human element? That's a daunting job. You probably know the cars can have so many more [driver] aids than they do now. Anybody can think that they might have an answer, an ultimate magic wand.

SS: It's ironic: Our houses are filled with affordable tech that improves every year, but the fastest race cars in the world don't look much different from a decade ago.

MA: It's still relevant. The different disciplines identify themselves in different ways. F1—they want to [stay] the pinnacle of technology. IndyCar is somewhere between NASCAR and F1. The technical aspect is still very important, but it's not

the ultimate [goal]. There are cost factors, and the spectacle, and now IndyCar is basically a spec series. You still have two engine manufacturers, but it gives the field enormous opportunity to get results. It's not the haves and have-nots, like it is in Formula 1. And because of that, the spectacle, I think, is greater. NASCAR, they want to keep the manufacturers happy, but they're primarily looking at the show. So each one has a little bit of a different interest in how they present the sport. You've got to have some diversity to make it attractive.



Andrew Trahan

SS: With open-wheel, there's never been such a concentration of driving talent, but it's also never been harder to see that talent at work. A lot of people think that racing achievement should be more obvious to the average fan—guys sliding around Indy, visible from the nosebleeds.

MA: You talk to 10 different people, you're going to get 10 different answers. I think it's valid, what Dan Gurney has been saying: We're all saying that we'd like to see the cars maybe more difficult to drive, which would mean more power and less downforce. You'd probably have the field split a little bit more, put more of the onus on the driver. He or she has to do more. It's a matter of opinion.

I'd personally like to see that more because that's what I experienced. I've driven the cars of late—you know, with so much downforce. It's not that they're easy to drive; it's just that you have more of a security blanket. Would [removing] that

improve the show? A lot of people say, "Oh yeah, that's where you get a lot of passing." Maybe yes, maybe no. Looking back at some of the races when I was on my game, I don't remember anyone complaining, "Oh this race, this idiot won, flag to flag."

People used to accept it. Today, the fans ... they're much more demanding. They expect every race to be a barn burner. We're going through this big cycle—almost natural, just part of the evolution. I don't think you're ever going to please everybody. But the sport does have a daunting job ahead of it, all of the major disciplines, to try to play in the best possible way. To keep the fans happy and keep them loyal.



Andrew Trahan

SS: Out of all the retired drivers we talk to, no matter their career, only about half say they'd get back in the cockpit. You miss it?

MA: [Pauses, looks down. Smiles softly.] My wife will tell you, she'll say, "When are you going to grow up, Mario?" I can never have enough. It's why I'm doing this [gestures at surroundings].

This keeps things going. I mean, it's not racing. The car that I normally drive is quite a bit faster than the car I'm driving today, but I ... I love my driving so much.

A few weeks ago, my son said, "Dad, we're going to do some high-speed testing down at Cape Canaveral. We need to do some slipstreaming, you and Marco and I at 240 mph." I was all in. I did 1400 miles in five days, all over 200 mph.

SS: I don't have words for how cool that is.

MA: So, why? Do you need to do it? No. If I have the opportunity, I just ... I was always all in, in driving. I'm 76 years old and still don't have enough.

SS: Do street cars count? It's funny—so many pro drivers couldn't care less.

MA: Always have. I always treated myself with sports cars.



Andrew Trahan

SS: You said something earlier about a Z06?

MA: Yeah, yeah. I have a Lamborghini Aventador, a Corvette. You know, I just love my cars. I just love sports cars. Always have. Always treated myself.

My other side ... some of my other family just love their SUVs. I have that, too, but I like my sports cars.

SS: Rick Mears told me that, even at the height of his career, Indy took time, every year, to get up to speed. He had to remember what it liked. Most drivers say that people underestimate it.

MA: Yeah. Because first it seems very easy, but the slightest mistake is a huge mistake. One thing—I never allow this place to intimidate me, because I think, well, I'm not just being a smart-ass, but if you feel intimidated, you're almost a danger. Because you hesitate. You just have to feel, I got this. It's the same as Milwaukee or anywhere else. All I've got to do is take the car to the limit, whatever that is.

SS: Or wherever.

MA: I never treated this place different than anywhere else. Because a lot of people only come to this race, they look at me mentoring [young drivers] the night before the race, and they say, "Shouldn't you be in bed?" I say no. I go to bed at 11 o'clock, no matter where I go. People think, you come here, you're gonna do things different. If you do, that means you're doing it wrong everywhere else. If you earn your way to the Super Bowl, do you start changing plays? You do what you know. This is just another race. What makes it special is that you're here to refine everything for longer than at any other place you go. And when it comes race day, you think everybody else is more refined, so you better be right at the peak.



Andrew Trahan

SS: In the past 10 or 20 years, there seems to have been an acknowledgement that you came up in a golden era—more than just a good period in racing. Any friends that you wish would write a book?

MA: There's probably more than one. I think [A. J.] Foyt should write a book. Wonder if he has or not. See how he would treat us. [Laughs.]

SS: One of the fascinating things about you two is how much the cars changed over the course of your careers. But you both kept working, couldn't stop learning.

MA: Oh, God, yes. You always try to improve, to be consistent. There's always something. If you don't challenge yourself every time out there, you're not doing your job. If you're not learning every time you're in the car, there's something in your driving that you're too blasé about.

If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough—that's my quote, right? I said that when we were talking about qualifying. But, at the same time ... I'll be driving one of these things [gestures to two-seat IndyCar], and every time out, I'll be faster and faster. I mean, I'm trying to stay within limits here. I don't want to bang any heads, but at the same time, I challenge myself. And then you just go faster and faster. If you don't try to improve every time out, you're doomed.