

Mario Andretti recalls miraculous flip 10 years later

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Frame grab of Mario Andretti crash April 23, 2003 via WTHR

To see footage of Mario Andretti's stunning flip, go to http://www.youtube.com/embed/TP_yTyfdmBQ

Kurt Busch may not want to read this story.

Ten years ago, with the same IndyCar team that will run the former NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion Thursday (May 9) at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, another test was held at the track.

Michael Andretti's team, then known as Andretti Green Racing, needed a stand-in for Tony Kanaan, who had broken his wrist a few days earlier in IndyCar's race in Japan. Mario Andretti volunteered.

Andretti was 63 at the time. Like Busch, he was eager to experience driving a current Indy car.

With only seconds left in the session, Andretti's car came screaming down the front straightaway. One more lap, the 1969 Indianapolis 500 winner thought.

As Andretti approached Turn 1 at speed, the track's yellow light came on. He thought it was the end of the session, but trouble was ahead at the exit of the blind corner.

Kenny Brack's car had crashed, scattering debris. Andretti, who was close enough to Brack to be in his air wake, hit a chunk of foam from what was then a relatively new SAFER barrier system, and it lifted his car's nose off the ground.

In a flash Andretti was cart-wheeling through the south end of the track. There were at least two rotations of the car, perhaps three. Few people saw it, in part because they were focused on Brack's car.

In fact, if not for WTHR-Channel 13 having a helicopter hovering over the track for the start of its 6 p.m. newscast, it's possible no one would have believed it. Andretti himself almost couldn't, and he went for the ride. Andretti describes it now as the wildest of his racing career.

"I took off like an F-16," he said recently. "It was a very helpless feeling.

"I'm not sure any corner worker really saw it because Kenny Brack was still in his car, and they were going (to help) him. Michael certainly didn't see it, and I really had no idea what it looked like.

“I knew I was gyrating around, but I had no concept of it.”

Michael knew something had happened, but he didn't know what. At the scene, witnesses told him it was a 50-foot launch, but that seemed unbelievable.

“Everybody always makes (an accident) worse than it actually was,” he said Wednesday.

Lying on the hotel bed a couple hours later, Michael saw the replay.

“Holy crap,” he remembers saying out loud.

Andretti, whose car somehow managed to land on its tires, only had a small cut on his chin.

“A miracle,” Michael said. “He told me the next day, ‘I'm done; that was my sign’ (to retire).”

<http://www.indystar.com/article/20130508/SPORTS0107/305080052/>