

Mario Andretti's win at Daytona in 1967 was memorable upset

That masterful performance, combined with his other driving achievements, puts the Nazareth resident in a class of his own



File: Mario Andretti sits in the driver's seat of an IROC after taking a few laps around the Daytona International Speedway in Daytona, Florida Tuesday, February 15, 2005. (DOUGLAS BENEDICT, TMC / February 15, 2005)

By Paul Reinhard, Special to The Morning Call

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Life decisions were usually pretty simple for **Mario Andretti**.

He can explain any career move with a matter-of-fact tenet: "I wanted to race everything I could get my hands on."

That credo powered him to championships in Indy cars and Formula One. It carried the

native of Montona, Italy, who settled down in **Nazareth** with his mother, dad and twin brother when he was 15, to victories in sports cars and sprint cars.

In 1966, for example, he ran 51 races in 14 different cars — and he won 14 events in four of those cars.

And, that's also how he came to drive in the **Daytona 500**, which 45 years ago was not yet fully established as the **Super Bowl** of stock car racing but was an attraction to competitors who were outside the good-ol'-boys mold. (This year's annual race is at noon Sunday on **FOX**.)

In 1967, automobile manufacturer Ford arranged for Andretti, its young, but fearless open-wheel hotshot, to be hooked up with John Holman and Ralph Moody, owners of one of stock car racing's premier teams.

Holman and Moody secured the services of the late J.C. "Suitcase Jake" Elder, an elementary-school dropout who could not read or write but knew race cars inside out and would go on to become one of **NASCAR**'s all-time great mechanics.

It was an unlikely pairing in pursuit of what seemed like an unattainable goal.

But because they shared an important character trait — the willingness to do whatever it took to succeed — Andretti and Elder combined to pull off what NASCAR a couple of years ago rated No. 4 on the list of Daytona 500 upsets.

"There are times when you think it was yesterday, and there are times when it seems like a lifetime ago," Andretti said as he considered the 45th anniversary of that milestone victory in his career.

He couldn't know it at the time, but the Daytona win, combined with his 1969 **Indianapolis 500** victory and 1978 Formula One world championship, set Andretti apart from all of his peers. No other driver has all those achievements on his resume.

"Clearly, it's something that comes to mind as the next race there comes around," said Andretti, who will turn 72 on Feb. 28. "It's such an important event in our sport; it was then and is now. It's still the shining star of NASCAR, and to have been able to be part of that, and to win, is something I value more and more every year.

"Every win has a special meaning. But the ones in the classics are talked about more and known not only by fans of sport but also by people in the mainstream. I won championships in Indy cars. But people I see in airports remember only my one Indy win. Daytona falls into that category."

Ford had the equipment

Andretti said he had seen open-wheel peers such as A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones and Dan Gurney trying their hand at the stock cars and "I wanted a piece of that."

He did not fare well in NASCAR's Grand National Series: four starts for three different car owners, three DNFs and a best finish of 16th in 1966.

Indy cars were another matter. In 15 starts in the United States Auto Club's premier series, he won eight times en route to a second straight national championship. He started on the pole nine times, and he recorded wins on paved ovals, a dirt track and a road course.

"The people at Ford were very accommodating," Andretti said. "All they needed to know was that I wanted to do [Daytona] and they had the equipment for me."

New engine, more speed

The '67 Daytona 500 was not smooth sailing for Andretti. While his teammate, Fred Lorenzen, was getting along just fine from the start, Andretti's car "had too much drag. We kept lowering the spoiler, which helped, but it also made the car very loose. I had no choice," Andretti said.

After not qualifying well, Andretti went out to practice the day before the 100-mile qualifier, only to find that the new engine in the car was suddenly much more powerful.

"I was practicing a mile and a half faster than [polesitter] Curtis Turner qualified," he said. "Bob Cassaday from Firestone came over and said, 'Do you know how fast you're going?' I said, 'They didn't give me the speed, but I don't need to know. I know I'm a lot faster than when I qualified.' All of a sudden, my revs were up; I was flying."

While the new-found speed made him feel better about his chances of keeping up with the competition, Andretti now had a different problem. NASCAR rules prohibited the team from making changes to the car after qualifying, so he had to race with the setup with which he qualified.

Good from the front

Andretti started 12th in the 500, and he knew he would not do well in a draft with other cars, but his car was very good in the lead.

"I was on pins and needles," he said. "I had to pay attention, but the car was very drivable. I could have never driven 500 miles if it wasn't. I had to be careful; the one thing I could not have was guys pass me on outside; it would have [spun] me right around. The whole race, if you notice, I'm riding right up by the wall. If anybody was going to pass me, it had to be on the inside."

Many people figured it was only a matter of time before Andretti would not be able to control the car in the high-banked corners.

"I don't think I ever turned left," he said. "I was going into the bank neutral, and all of a

sudden, I had to do a slight correction turning to the right to keep the car straight. I had zero understeer, zero push. When I had new tires, the car was absolutely neutral, and as it kept going, it got looser and looser."

Dueling with Pearson

Loose, maybe, but also, very fast, Andretti took the lead for the first time on the 23rd lap and was around the front all day. He led for a total of 112 laps — David Pearson was second with 31.

"The best wheel-to-wheel go I had for many laps was with Pearson, one of the best who ever drove there," Andretti said. The two accounted for seven lead changes in the space of 30 laps before Pearson went out with a blown engine after 159 laps. But the race still was not over.

The ever patient Lorenzen took Pearson's place in the charge and moved into second place. The teammates pitted together under yellow at the end of Lap 163. It was a stop Andretti will never forget.

"I was leading, he was second," Andretti said. "They let him go out first; they held me up for about seven seconds. I was so [ticked]. I threw it into gear and I was going to get the wheels spinning while the car was still up on jacks. They finally let it go down and Fred was already in the first turn when I got out of the pits."

Andretti called it "a little bit of a political move" and said, "He was the golden boy and Ford probably would have preferred him to win."

The call to allow Lorenzen to go out first was made by a Ford guy Andretti didn't want to single out, although he did say that when the guy retired a couple of years ago, "I sort of gave him a little bit of a stick about it."

Surprise tactic

It took Andretti only three laps to run down Lorenzen and take the lead on the 168th lap. Then came the hard part: holding him off.

"That's who I feared the most because as for drafting, Freddie was a total artist about it," Andretti said. "I thought I would have a tough time."

Twelve laps from the end, Andretti surprised Lorenzen as the two overtook Tiny Lund on the track. Instead of taking the high line familiar to NASCAR drivers, "I sort of tricked him. I dove low, and he got out of the throttle. It startled him, and by the time I came out on the other side he never could catch me."

Andretti was 20 seconds in front when an accident brought out the yellow flag and forced the race to finish under caution. "It didn't matter because [Lorenzen] was so far behind he would have never caught me anyway. I wasn't given that victory."

Waddel Wilson, who built the engine for Andretti's car, in a story five years ago, said, "Mario is too gracious. That Daytona 500 was his as long as he could keep from going completely sideways in the turns, which didn't seem possible and still amazes me to this day."

"When you're in somebody else's sandbox, you have to play a different game if you're going to win," Andretti said about beating the NASCAR guys at Daytona. "You can't play their game. They're too good at it. Some of it was by accident, but I understood what I had to deal with. I felt it was extra special to be competitive in something we don't specialize in. I'm sure they would feel the same way if they ever won the Indianapolis 500."

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