

Sebring 60th countdown, #5: Andretti's dramatic finish

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The Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring Presented by Fresh From Florida celebrates its 60th running this year, with Sebring International Raceway's tooth-loosening concrete runways hosting the opening round of the new-for-2012 FIA World Endurance Championship.

This week, as we count down to that milestone race on March 14-17, we're taking a look back with one of its greatest champions, three-time winner Mario Andretti.

“Steve McQueen was getting all the credit...”

Andretti turned 72 last Tuesday, Feb. 28, a number with a nice round symmetry – his 1972 win, his third and final triumph at Sebring, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

Two years earlier, in the '70 race, Andretti scored his second – and unquestionably his most dramatic – victory in the No. 21 Ferrari 512S originally entered for the Italian pairing of Ignazio Giunti and Nino Vaccarella. It wasn't the car Andretti had started the race in, but his final, no-holds-barred stint in it would go down in Sebring lore.



Andretti began the day on pole in the spyder-bodied No. 19 512S (LEFT) co-driven by Arturo Merzario, ahead of a Porsche 917 shared by Brian Redman and Jo Siffert. An exciting back-and-forth tussle between the two cars defined the first 100 laps until, as attrition began to take its toll on the field, the Redman/Siffert Porsche was one of the cars beaten into submission by the bumps and retired eight hours in with suspension problems.

Its main opposition gone, the Andretti/Merzario Ferrari built up a massive 13-lap lead – until also meeting its demise, courtesy of a broken transmission after 227 laps.

With the leader out, the coupe-bodied Giunti/Vaccarella 512S ran second, behind Siffert, who had jumped into the 917 of Pedro Rodriguez and Leo Kinnunen. Also moving into the picture was the Porsche 908 driven by Hollywood star Steve McQueen (suffering from a broken left foot after a motorcycle accident) and soon-to-be-F1-regular Peter Revson. The 908 wasn't the fastest car in the place by any means, having started only 15th, but it ran like clockwork while more potent machines began to fall by the wayside.



With 55 minutes remaining, Ferrari technical wizard and team manager Mauro Forghieri decided to throw Andretti into the No. 21 car (RIGHT) and see what he could do. Bringing the 512S in promoted the McQueen/Revson 908 up to second, so now at least Andretti had something tangible to chase after. But after driving the spyder all week, not the coupe, Andretti found himself in an unfamiliar car, set up for different-sized drivers, when pressed into action.

“Well, I did have reservations about it because Nino Vaccarella was taller than I am,” Andretti recalls. “Ignazio Giunti was a little bit closer, but I knew I wouldn't fit. Plus, I had been in the spyder and this was the coupe. I didn't really want to do it, but Mauro Forghieri said he wanted me to do it. Vaccarella's pace hadn't really been great.”



Reduced vision and hitting the marks in darkness also made it a challenge, but – this being Mario Andretti after all – adapting was merely part of the task at hand.

“Yeah, the vision was another thing,” he admits. “Overall, it was just really low. One of the engineers, Gianni Marelli, drove the car back to the hangar after the race, and he kept saying, ‘I cannot believe you guys could see out of that windscreen!’

“And then the markings on the track weren't good,” Andretti adds. “It was so easy to damage the body of the car on those stupid tires that marked the apex of the turns. You had to really, *really* know where you were and where they were. By then, I guess I did.”

As Andretti began to get in the groove with the coupe, his chase of the 908 soon evolved into a battle for the lead when the remaining 917 pitted with suspension problems in the final 20 minutes. McQueen, broken foot and all, had been *the* story of the week so far, but Andretti knew Revson was largely responsible for the little Porsche being in contention – and pulled out all the stops in his quest to hunt the 908 down.



“As I've explained many times, I was really mad that Revson (with his more celebrated co-driver, LEFT) was doing all the running and the grunt work in that Porsche, and Steve McQueen was getting all the credit,” Andretti notes. “So I jumped into this car almost in anger, in an ‘I'll show you!’ kinda way, and I just drove like a madman and the car was working OK.

“I mean, I couldn't see worth a damn. The windscreen was so bad. When you're used to it, it's one thing, but when you just jump right in, that's another matter. But I was really determined. It's just one of those things you do. I had less than an hour to make it happen.”

Andretti says the coupe's additional weight was the only hindrance to his late race charge but, by the end of the race, he had maximized its potential pace.

“Yeah. It was slower – a little heavier,” he says. “It felt like the acceleration was a little lazier. But it handled well. Toward the end of that stint, I was taking Turn 1 flat, and it was the first time I ever did that. So the car was working better than the spyder, which was flexible without the roof, and was a bit more nervous.”

Able to push the Ferrari in the final hour, Andretti's relentless charge took him past Revson with minutes remaining. Unfortunately, the pace required a pit stop for a splash of fuel, but Andretti returned to the track just seconds ahead of the 908 – and, still fired up, managed to pull out a 22.1sec gap to Revson by the checkered flag. It marked the closest margin of victory at Sebring to that point.



That 1970 win – preceded by his first in a Ford GT40 Mk IV in '67 (LEFT), and followed by his third in '72 in a Ferrari 312, reinforced two of Andretti's keys to Sebring success: having a co-driver who normally races sports cars, and working well through traffic.

“I felt that I could always qualify a sports car well if I had a teammate who was basically more of a sports car racer than an open-wheel guy,” he explains. “They'd do what they do best in the race itself, but I always felt I could

be faster in qualifying, so they always let me. I used to have a ball thrashing around in those cars. I relished going for pole and I took a lot of sports car poles. Sebring is a really technical track where, if you take a few chances, you can really get paid back in lap time – but you can really pay dearly, too.

“At Sebring, you're in traffic forever, and it's relatively narrow as well. My biggest concern was getting pinched in the corners and not having the leeway to put the inside wheels on the apron because of the tire markers. You had to be really watchful of that. If you got someone going into a corner, you better have him cleared. And, to be honest, because of that, many of your rivals would drive very tentatively, so you'd take advantage of that by being braver while remaining smart and clean.”

Comparing and contrasting wins in major races is a bit like picking your favorite child – difficult. But Andretti recalls all his Sebring wins with fondness, and notes that each was very different from the others.

“For '67, Bruce (McLaren, his co-driver) in particular taught me some good trailing-throttle and braking techniques and how to carry speed in, but concentrate on the exits,” he says. “He was very open and honest with me, and I definitely listened and learned and put it to good use.

“I think Ferrari realized Ford was going to be the gorilla this time, and they were psyched out. Ford was just going to do everything necessary to make it happen. The way the Mk IV came out of the box so quick...well, kudos to guys like Phil Remington, who shaped that car without a wind tunnel. We just did some testing at Kingman, Ariz., places like that. We had to drive hard that year at Sebring, because when the Chaparral was going, we were giving it 10 tenths, taking everything out of the car, and thankfully the reliability was there.”



The 1972 win (ABOVE, Mario's winning 312) was almost entirely straightforward. Andretti says as much: “Yeah, we just dominated if you look at the statistics. We had an oil pressure problem, though. During practice, it was so hot that when we came into the pits, they were throwing a cold rag on the fuel pump and that cracked the magnesium block at one point and so, once it got hot, we were losing oil. So the whole race we kept replenishing the oil, but that was the only issue, and we still brought it home to victory.”

But for all three wins, the common factor was, and remains so today, having the car, the stamina and the good fortune to be able to take on and beat not just the opposition, but one of the roughest, toughest tracks in racing.

“Those Sebring bumps just beat you to death,” chuckles Andretti. “I tell you, Le Mans is a walk in the park by comparison...”

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