

IndyCar Media Conference

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Mario Andretti

Press Conference



DOUG BOLES: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for being here today. We are 137 days away from the 103rd running of the Indianapolis 500, and we're actually 141 days away from what will officially be the 50th anniversary of Mario Andretti's win at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on May 30, 1969, and we have chosen this year along with Mario and his family to celebrate that 50th anniversary as we lead into the month of May. So we're here today to talk a little bit about how we're going to do that.

A lot of great things to get our fans involved, a lot of great things that are going to take place here at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Obviously the name Mario Andretti means a lot to a lot of people around the world. Even people who aren't in racing know the world Mario Andretti, so Mario, thank you for joining us today.

Obviously I said your name means an awful lot to the sport, but I think the sport has meant a awful lot to you. Your whole life has been in it. If you could talk a little bit about what did winning the Indy 500 do for your career and what has it done over those 50 years?

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, it's a race that's with you forever. There's no question about it. But when you win it, it does change your life in so many ways, and all for the better, quite honestly. Career-wise, it opens doors that you could have only hoped for before, and your personal life changes dramatically.

But again, Dee Ann used to say, well, after he won Indy, I kind of lost him. But I said, Dee Ann, you're just going to be traveling a lot more with me, that's all.

But again, this race carries so much weight because -- and I've said this so many times, and I mean it, that it's the only race on the globe that I think is worth a championship because I think looking back to '69, it was really a banner year for me. I got four championships in IndyCars, and the '69 one was particularly interesting for me, and I feel I was so blessed that the season was so versatile because for the championship you had the dirt cars, you had dirt tracks, you had road courses. I mean, good road courses. I mean, the last race of the season was Riverside. And then you had even Pike's Peak counted for the championship.

I won on the road course, I won on the short oval and

the Superspeedway and even Pike's Peak. But really the big flower here, the jewel was obviously the 500. And what was so significant for me, also, was the fact that I felt I was competitive from the get-go, from when I was a rookie in '65. I finished third and won a national championship, and then the next two years, '66, '67 I sat on pole, and I think I probably could have won those races, quite honestly. I felt the car -- I mean, I had really a barn burner at the time.

But I didn't finish '66, '67 or '68, so the next race that I finished from my rookie year was '69, and of all people that was on the team that I was able to win it for, not just for myself but for Andy Granatelli, and I'll tell you, in my opinion nobody deserved that victory more than he did because of what he meant to the Speedway.

To him, the book says, the cars were listed by owner, but the bottom line is his innovative spirit with the Novis and then of course the jet cars. He was always trying to think outside the box, and we came here in '69 with a state-of-the-art, the four-wheel drive Lotus but not with the jet engine. We had the new Ford engine.

And again, we were breaking records in practice, and I was really happy with the car, but soon we found out how fragile the car was, and I said, oh, boy, here we go again. I think the first weekend was rained out, so there was just -- we were going on to the second weekend, and on the Thursday, a wheel snapped right off coming off of Turn 4, and I almost killed myself on that one. So destroyed the car, and then Colin Chapman decided to pull all three of the cars out of the race, so we had a spare car that we did not intend to race, the Brawner Hawk.

The good thing about the Brawner Hawk is that the last race just before here, which was Hanford, we won. But there were some other issues with it. So the bottom line is we practiced, we put it on the front row, and okay, keep going, keep your chin up, buddy, keep going. We were really treading towards adversity on this one, and then in the race I had overheating like you can't believe it.

What was interesting was I had a -- because it was really hot in the cockpit because we had to put an extra revvy in right behind my seat, and we didn't qualify that way so we had to hide it. So Clint Brawner put a big bottle of Gatorade in the cockpit with me so I could suck it up, and about, I don't know, 20 laps into the race I was already really hot.

And all of a sudden I see this swirling in the cockpit, and I said, oh, no, I must have a radiator leak or something. But the engine was singing, was still going. We kept going and going, and the car, we were up in the front, and most of the race, we led more than half of it.

And again, crossing that finish line was just the greatest moment of my life. It was just amazing, just like the 900-pound gorilla was lifted off my shoulders. I figure from here on, it's going to be easy to put a half a dozen together.

But this turned out to be the one, and I'm so grateful for what you guys, the Speedway is doing. It almost seems like 100 years ago or yesterday. You know, just amazing.

But the memories are vivid, no question about it, and again, just looking back, I just feel just how blessed I've been, and now we've got skin in the game with the kids having fun with it, and it just gives me every reason to be here every year, and like the first year, we just always look forward to coming here with the same energy and the same desire.

DOUG BOLES: Your career is impressive, obviously the win here at the speedway, a Formula 1 championship, four IndyCar championships, you won Daytona 500, 24 hours at Daytona, 12 hours of Sebring, countless races in other places. The one thing I think most of us have been impressed with is what you've done over the last 10 years to help promote the IndyCar Series. You have been vocal about what a great sport it is. You talked a minute ago about the diversity of the championship when you ran. The diversity is the same really minus the dirt cars, but you had the same kind of diversity. A lot of races win their races and retire their career and fade off into the sunset. You have been more active as a spokesperson for the IndyCar Series and what a great series it is than maybe anybody. Talk about what you see in the series today and why it's so exciting.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, first of all, I just love the series. I know what it's done for me, but also, loving the sport, period, I know the value of it, and again, the values are always put into that are probably not talked about enough is the versatility, how complete a champion needs to be in this series. And I'll tell you, in the world of specializing today, this is the only series at the top level that can make that claim on versatility. So it's got that extreme value.

You go from here, you go to St. Louis or something, a mile track, then you go on a street course, then you go on a natural road course, and again, another superspeedway.

As far as the season, it's daunting, but it's got more

satisfaction than you could ever imagine from a driver's standpoint, and that's tremendous value.

Again, I have just a deep love for this series, the sport, and I've seen -- I don't really need to get into that, the issues that we had back in the mid-'90s, but right now to see that, it's really gaining the status that it deserves, and I think that in itself I think is very encouraging, and it gives you a lot of reason to be extremely optimistic.

And again, when you believe in season, you've just gotta keep talking about it, keep preaching, keep working at it because the value is there. Just like the thing that I enjoy so much besides even the two seaters, besides driving, of course, you know, I'm just crazy about that, but is how valuable that is to showcase our sport because it's such a non-participant sport, and to media especially, they're the ones that write about the sport, I think, and fans that have been following us, oh, this is what it's like. You can see that there's a whole new energy coming away from the people, and you feel like you're cultivating it like one by one, like if I get a dozen people a day or whatever, I think we've got a dozen more that will always remember and will go for it.

So you've got to be tireless about doing it. It's never enough season for trying to promote the series. Again, it's just what we love.

DOUG BOLES: On behalf of everybody at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the car promoters in the IndyCar Series, we appreciate all that you're doing to do that. We get to do something pretty fun right now. We're going to unveil a logo that's been designed really to help us celebrate Mario's 50th anniversary this year. It's a logo that you will see on the program of the Indianapolis 500 this year. You're going to see it on merchandise. It's really a way that we can celebrate alongside you and the fans who have invested so much of their passion in this sport and watching you and your family and what you've given to the sport. So if you don't mind, we're going to have you go up and we're going to have Mark Miles, the Hulman & Company CEO, who is donned in his Robin Miller-prepared Mario Andretti sweatshirt, to have you guys unveil this logo that we're going to use to celebrate Mario here for the 50th. We're pretty excited about it. You see that iconic smile and wave that Mario gave from Victory Lane. Obviously the 50 means an awful lot. The zero in there looks a lot like an oval where Mario was really successful in 1969.

So again, you're going to see that throughout the year as we lead into the Indy 500. Lots of merchandise, lots of other places. All the fans here at the Speedway and the IndyCar Series are looking forward to celebrating it with Mario and the rest of the organization.

A couple other exciting things that we'll be talking

about later this year or this spring, I don't know if you know this or not, but one of the most coveted items every May is our bronze badge and our silver badge here at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. We will be unveiling those later this spring, but they will feature Mario Andretti, so the badges that allow you into the garage area and pit lane will be a tribute to Mario Andretti. We're really excited about that to help us celebrate. And then on May 1st --

MARIO ANDRETTI: Do you know how much I wanted those badges, how much I fought for one when I was a kid?

DOUG BOLES: And now you're going to see them everywhere in May, which we're excited about. The foundation, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway museum beginning May 1st is going to have an unbelievable exhibit to celebrate your career here not just at the Indianapolis 500 but in racing altogether, so we're looking forward to that unveiling in May and carrying on through the summer. We have done that for some of our iconic figures over the last few years, but I have a feeling that there will be none quite like the Mario Andretti exhibit.

Maybe a closing comment before we take any questions. If you could rewind to 1965, May 1st, coming to your first Indianapolis 500 as a rookie and you could tell yourself at that point in time how your career was going to be, would you believe it?

MARIO ANDRETTI: There's no way. No, no. You know, as a driver, what do you shoot for? What are your goals? And when you reach this level, when you reach Indy, you felt, okay, this is the plateau that I want to remain on, and hopefully I can earn to keep, because that's as far as you can go here in America. And so that in itself I think, just be able to have the opportunity to race here, and as a rookie, a lot of things are just obviously thrown at you for the first time.

The one thing that I remember that was so daunting was because when I got here, I had never driven a rear-engine car. I had a roadster right up until the last race. We had Phoenix, we had Trenton, and the rear engine car wasn't ready until like the last day of the drivers' test. Like I said, I never had it on the track. So you talk about nervous. And I'll tell you what, nervous Nelly like you never saw. I had no fingers on my nails or anything. But the bottom line is the car was right, right from the get-go. I went out there, and we breezed through the test, and I remember that evening was probably about maybe 5:30, and saw Jim McGee was all happy. He said, tomorrow we can just go for some speed, and I said, well, let me shake it down now that I'm not restricted, and we set quick times that day. So I said, oh, my God, I couldn't believe it.

So can you imagine the feeling as a young lad here and having -- feeling that somehow we had something

to work with, and you had the Parnelli Jones, the Jim Clarks, the Foyts, all the dudes were here. I set a quick time that first day.

Then like I said, we played it conservative in qualifying. But in the race we had some other -- I'm not going to get into it with the issues, but finished third, and I felt, oh, what a wonderful thing. As a rookie that's what you want. Unless you can win, you want Rookie of the Year, because you can only get that once. So it was a very auspicious beginning, and the season continued because in my rookie year I won the championship. In fact, at the time I was the youngest guy to win it.

But there's one caveat here, something I've got to tell you. I think I've told this story before. You talk about the enormity of this race; myself at the end of the year, I was invited on the Johnny Carson show, and proud as a peacock, of course, and I was introduced as not the national champion but as the Rookie of the Year at Indianapolis.

At that point I realized how important this race really is. I said, here I win the national championship, and somehow they're not even probably going to mention it. At least I did. But the Rookie of the Year at Indianapolis was the thing.

Again, I don't know what else to really say to top all that, but again, it was an auspicious beginning for me, and it's been 29 wonderful years here as a driver. I wish, again, obviously we all strive for more than -- at least one win but then for more. Once you get one, you want more. But the fact that I think I'm third all-time in laps led, all except for AI, more than the four-time winners, tells you that I had a lot of good times here.

THE MODERATOR: You led 556 laps, 1390 miles, started 29 races, which is second only to AJ. By the way, you have one lap more than AJ did in leading, which I know that was important.

MARIO ANDRETTI: That's enough. He's a lap behind.

THE MODERATOR: At the risk of ruining my relationship with AJ Foyt, AJ has the distinction of starting the most 500s at 35. You've started 29. But if you think about 2011 through 2018, and again in 2019, you have put on a fire suit, a helmet, strapped into an IndyCar, you have been at the starting grid and rolled off when the pace car rolled off more times than any other driver in history. You have rolled off the grid on race morning 37 times, so you have beaten AJ in terms of the number of times a driver suited up on race morning and gone racing.

MARIO ANDRETTI: There you go.

THE MODERATOR: With that, we will take any questions.

Q. The crash that you had in '69 left your face badly burned. Your brother Aldo had to sit in on the front row photo that year. How much pain were you in the rest of the month or on race day?

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, I mean, pain per se, burns are burns. But a lot of it was like there was some swelling, and my breathing was not very good because it was wrapped, my nose, so you just had to breathe with the mouth, and you got really dry when you do that. That's why I had this big bottle of Gatorade that actually leaked out. But nevertheless, I mean, it was annoying for sure.

When you have a job at hand like that, I mean, you don't even -- you don't bother with those things. Those are small things. I think your adrenaline takes over, and you just do your job.

Q. You've always embraced technology and been eager to drive groundbreaking cars. Do you take any -- see any irony in the fact that you won with a car that wasn't just old but pretty well used at that point?

MARIO ANDRETTI: Yeah, I mean, the irony is that, yeah, of course, but as you can imagine, as I said before, that's not the car that was really -- that was intended to be driven here. We were a bit shy in spares because I had a deal that I had done with Colin Chapman the year before when I actually -- in '68 when I owned the team, and then when Andy Granatelli bought us out, which was a blessing for me, I didn't want to be an owner, then the deal came over. So we had the car that Colin honored the deal, and then he entered his two cars, I think it was with Graham Hill and I forget who else. But anyway, so there were three of those cars.

And at the time, even aerodynamically you look at the car, it was really nicely done. The basic chassis and the running gear was that of the year before when they ran the jet car, the turbine car I should say with four-wheel drive and all that. So for here, the car was just amazing because I remember that going through Turn 1, some of the guys were out there using timing. All of a sudden we were running numbers that they hadn't seen before, so we were quick.

But of course, the car was part of the Formula 1 project for Colin, and of course he tried to make the components, suspension components, light enough to be the same ones for Formula 1, and we paid the price. I mean, the hub just sheared right off into Turn 4 there, and we destroyed the car, of course.

So we had no other option but to go with a Brawner Hawk, and again, it was different for sure. The car was not as quick through the corners, much more of a handful, but you know, you just got what you got. So we put our nose to the grindstone and said we've got to make the best of it, and it turned out to be the best.

Q. It's my understanding that John Andretti was having surgery today. I wouldn't know that you have any information on that yet, but just in general, how has John been doing and your thoughts about him today?

MARIO ANDRETTI: I'll tell you what, John is a real champion. You talk about inspiration, for someone that is dealing with something as severe as that, I mean, his spirits are high and strong, and he's probably still undergoing the surgery because he went in around noon. And again, I don't have a report yet. But if anyone can pull through something like this, it's going to be him, you know, for many reasons. It's our prayers and everything that goes with it. But it's just believing and thinking positive, and he's like no other. Always has a smile. I mean, we talk, hey, how you doing. I'm doing fine, how you doing, that type of thing. He doesn't want anybody to feel sorry for him. He says, I'm fine, I'm good.

Again, my heart goes out to him in every way, such a wonderful family. But he'll pull through. He'll pull through. We just feel very positive about it.

Q. You were a Formula 1 world champion, you were an IndyCar champion; how do you compare -- in my mind, if you win IndyCar Series, as you've pointed out, you are probably the best driver in the world, and I've got to think that the drivers in this series now could rival anybody. There's nobody in their class, as you said. They run on a three-quarter-mile track and they run on a mile track at Gateway, run a two-and-a-half-mile here and at Watkins Glen, and an IndyCar champion has got to be the best driver in the world.

MARIO ANDRETTI: Well, that's a great compliment, thank you. To me, it's just what I loved. I used to get a kick out of going to the extremes, like going from Argentina to DuQuoin, Illinois, in the dirt. It's just a tough thing. In '68 we're going to Monza, and we had to come back, qualified Friday and come back here, race at the Hoosier Hundred and come back on Sunday type of thing.

Just again, even to have those opportunities, quite honestly, I just -- I love all phases of our sport, and I was always curious, too. You know, it's not a matter of -- I know what I specialize in because what I love the most is the purest, the purest form of the sport, which is open wheel single seaters, which is IndyCars or Formula 1. The rest of it is a derivative of something. But it's still interesting in every possible way and requires special skills.

For me to have the opportunity to drive for top teams and go to another discipline, it was incredible satisfaction that I had that I feel I'm the luckiest man in the world to have had that opportunity.

I think one thing I probably can say, that it will be a long

time before a world champion Formula 1 will have won the Hoosier hundred. (Laughter.)

DOUG BOLES: Thank you very much for spending time with us today. We thank you for all you've done for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and for the sport of IndyCar racing, for the sport of motorsports. We look forward to working with you over the next few months and in 137 days watching you lead the field off once again.

MARIO ANDRETTI: I'll say thank you. Thank you all. I'm privileged, feel privileged.