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MARIO ANDRETTI - Part One : Ales Norsky and Patrick O'Brien

Mario Andretti at 80 – Part One of Two Story by Ales Norsky and Patrick O'Brien. Images by Roman Klemm. Click to view special [Gallery](#).

Mario Gabriele Andretti, the race car driver. Born in 1940 in the medieval Italian town of Montona (now Montovun, Croatia), his already war-tainted world changed dramatically when, after the war, the town and its vicinity fell under the control of communist Yugoslavia. The Andrettis stayed put for three more years and then relocated to a camp for displaced people in Lucca, Tuscany. Back on the Italian soil, Mario and his twin brother Aldo soon discovered the magic of auto racing, names like Alfa Romeo, Ferrari and Maserati represented for them the greatest of all things Italian. However, after seven years of refugee existence, the family decided to move to the United States and eventually settled in the small Pennsylvania town of Nazareth.

Ever since seeing Alberto Ascari racing a Ferrari at Monza in 1954, Mario and Aldo wanted race in Grand Prix. But this was not possible in Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, they soon discovered a small race track right near their new home town. It was a half-mile oval that looked nothing like what they remembered from Italy, but it still offered a real chance to go racing. Using a rebuilt 1948 Hudson Hornet stock car, Mario and Aldo slowly launched their racing careers in 1958 and both soon started to win races. On 2 May 1959, Mario took his first notable professional victory at the Nazareth Speedway. Unfortunately, Aldo fractured his skull in a crash later in the season and fell into a coma. He would recover, and continued racing on the United States Auto Club (USAC) and International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) circuits until 1969, when he suffered another serious crash in an IMCA sprint race at Des Moines, Iowa. Aldo endured painful recovery from 14 fractures to his facial bones and decided to quit racing. Fortunately, it would turn out better for Mario, whose professional racing career would eventually span five decades, and his name would become synonymous with speed across North America. And not only around the racing circuits, but throughout the popular culture by way of various articles, books, songs, and even a TV commercial promoting men's underwear.

After those enthusiastic but humble beginnings Mario graduated to Midget racing, one of the oldest and most popular racing series in the United States. In 1962 he had achieved his first win. Besides Midgets, Mario was also racing the USAC Sprint Cars and in 1964 graduated into the big league, the USAC Championship Car series. This class would change its name several times as years went by, but remained universally known as IndyCar. Although he did not really figure in the Championship standings (11th with one podium), Mario so impressed Jim Clark that the legendary Scot pointed him out to Colin Chapman. The very next year Mario did not only win his first IndyCar race, but also the series title and the Indy 500 Rookie Award for finishing third from the fourth starting position, in Brawner-Hawk Ford (rebuilt Brabham BT12). He was the series champion again in 1966, driving the same car, this time in dominant style with eight wins from 16 races and pole position at Indy.

During the following couple of years, Mario continued to win races, if not championships. In the 21-race 1967 IndyCar season Mario won eight times, driving Brawner-Hawk Ford and Kuzma Offenhauser. He was on pole position for the Indy 500 again, and also managed to win the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) crown jewel 500-mile race at Daytona in a Ford, and the 12-hour endurance classic at Sebring, sharing a Ford GT MkIV with Bruce McLaren. The 1968 USAC IndyCar season featured no less than 28 races and Mario was victorious four times in Brawner-Hawk Ford, Kuzma Offenhauser, and Brawner-Drake

Offenhauser. Despite the busy schedule, he has also found time to try his hand in National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) drag racing with the innovative Ford Mustang 428 Cobra Jet but, more importantly, circumstances did offer Mario a chance to finally drive a Formula 1 car.

After losing Jim Clark earlier in the season, Colin Chapman remembered the name Mario Andretti from four years earlier and decided to try the American in a third Lotus 49B Ford at Monza, alongside Graham Hill and Jackie Oliver. This offer was obviously irresistible to Mario, but it proved to be a false start to his Grand Prix career. He arrived in Italy four days after winning an USAC IndyCar race in Illinois, and hurriedly completed only the minimum required number of laps in the Friday qualifying session, before jumping on a plane back to the United States to compete in another USAC IndyCar event held on Saturday in Indiana. His time would have put him 10th on the grid (ahead of Oliver), but he did not return for the Sunday Grand Prix because of the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) rule, instituted after Fangio's near fatal accident at Monza in 1952, which prohibited any driver to compete in more than one event during a 24-hour period. Allegedly, the organisers initially promised Chapman that they would overlook this rule in the case of Andretti, but finally decided otherwise. Chapman nonetheless hoped up until the last moment that his driver would arrive and even had his car rolled onto the starting grid.... only to have to remove it shortly afterwards. Yet, it would all be very different four weeks later.

Driving for Chapman again at the US Grand Prix, Mario set the pole position time with apparent ease. Some of the Formula 1 community and the European press dismissed and were critical of Andretti, and claimed that his pole position was due to the circuit being virtually his own backyard. But the truth was rather different, whilst the F1 teams were competing at the Glen since the venue's 1961 World Championship inception, Mario had never even seen the place before! He led his first Formula 1 race for half a lap until Stewart's dominant Matra Ford went by. The rookie held on until mechanical trouble forced retirement after 32 of 108 laps. Not bad. Unfortunately, Mario only did this one Formula 1 race in 1968, and just three more with Lotus (models 49B and 63) in 1969, all resulting in early retirements. Chapman wanted him full-time, but sponsor contracts, race commitments and higher earnings made the US series a priority.

The 1969 USAC IndyCar season was a great success for Mario. He would win his third series title and nine of 24 races, his wins as diverse as the Pikes Peak Colorado hill climb in Chevrolet STP Special and the 500-mile race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in Brawner-Hawk Ford. Many expected that this was first of many occasions when Mario would taste the milk in the 'Winner's Circle', but the future would only bring him a series of sometimes bitter disappointments at the Speedway. In fact, of his 29 starts in the Indy 500, no less than 14 would end in retirement due to mechanical failure, often after only a handful of laps. On other occasions, a victory would just slip through his fingers... but we will get to that later.

During the late 1960s, Mario's career began to branch out to all levels of auto racing. In addition to IndyCars and Formula 1, he would successfully compete in endurance racing, FIA Sportscars as well as in Sports Car Club of America (SCCA)-sanctioned Can-Am Cup, F5000, and on North American dirt tracks. His results maybe did suffer a bit as consequence, but there was still plenty of satisfaction too. During the 1970s Mario would claim only three IndyCar victories, yet, he still would figure among the top-ten in the USAC Championship standings in 1970, 1971, 1973, 1976 and 1977. His record would also include seven F5000 and six more FIA Sportscar wins (in addition to his 1967 Sebring triumph). Despite all this versatility (unmatched ever before or since) during this decade, his focus would slowly but surely gravitate towards two main goals; the Formula 1 World Championship and another Indy 500.

The 1970 Grand Prix season that consisted of 13 races, saw Mario appear in five of them, driving new but off-pace March 701 Ford for STP Corporation. A third place in Spain was the only result where he even reached the finish line, and it was only good enough to share 15th place with Reine Wisell in the final points standings. At the Austrian GP, Andretti spun off the circuit due to a jammed throttle and came to rest upside down in a swamp at the edge of the track. Were it not for some helpful spectators righting the car, he might have actually drowned! And when the mechanics came to recover the car, they found that the fans had stripped and removed everything down to the chassis tub for souvenirs. The project had to be abandoned before the final North American races, which did not bother Andretti much, as he had apparently lost confidence in the team because of that crash. Away Formula 1, things were brighter. The Ferrari 512S he shared with Arturo Merzario and Jacky Ickx was on pole position for the 24-hour race at Daytona, and they finished third. Only a few weeks later Mario won his second Sebring 12-hour event, sharing the same car with Ignazio Giunti and Nino Vaccarella, and he did not do too badly in the month of May at the Speedway either, taking sixth place in the Indy 500 Sweepstakes in a McNamara Ford. Later in the year he won another USAC IndyCar race in Washington state with the same car.

Andretti not only mastered driving smoothness, but also had great ability to assist with car development and set-up. Initially, the Europeans were sceptical when Mario had carefully inspected tyres before the race, selecting which would go on what wheel. He adopted this habit from oval racing, and the goal was to select the best combination for each particular circuit. The F1 team personnel soon got used to this 'black magic' and learned to respect it.

For 1971 great things were expected, Enzo Ferrari had lured Mario to Maranello. Although again competing just five times (the full season had 11 races), it was a dream come true. Behind the wheel of 312B, Mario won first time out at the season opening South African Grand Prix at Kyalami. Three weeks later, Andretti and Ferrari excelled again, in what was billed as an 'International Conflict Race' the Questor Grand Prix at Ontario Motor Speedway in California. The race featured the Formula 1 stars in wheel-to-wheel combat with top American drivers in F5000 cars. Nonetheless, the F5000 cars have definitely not been the best the American series had to offer, and the Grand Prix racers dominated. Mario won the two-heat race, beating Jackie Stewart with his Tyrrell 001 Ford in both runs. After a few difficult races, highlighted by the failure to qualify in Monaco, Mario managed a fine fourth at the daunting Nurburgring, and figured in eighth place overall at the season's end. He was unlucky at the Speedway, completing only 11 laps in McNamara Ford, but the form came back at a Sportscar race at Kyalami. The Ferrari 312P he shared with Ickx was on pole position and finished second behind the sister car of Regazzoni and Brian Redman.

In 1972, Mario's now customary five F1 races in a 12-race season yielded just a fourth and a sixth place in Ferrari 312B2, good for 12th place overall. Things were better in Sportscar. Again, sharing the Ferrari 312P with Ickx, they won both North American endurance classics at Daytona and Sebring, plus the six-hours at Watkins Glen and 1000 Km of Brands Hatch. However, Daytona was shortened to six hours due to the rule change for Group 5 category. The engine size was reduced from five litres to three, and there were concerns that the new engines would not last the entire 24 hours. And the Indy 500 brought an eighth place finish in a Parnelli Offenhauser.

Mario stayed 'stateside' for 1973 and most of 1974. In 1973 he won a single USAC IndyCar race in New Jersey, driving Parnelli-Drake Offenhauser, but was unlucky at the Speedway once again, completing only four laps. He remained with Parnelli for 1974 as the team switched to Eagle chassis, yet the results did not come. The Indy 500 was disastrous again (retirement on lap 3) but Mario managed to win the USAC Silver Crown National Championship for Sprint Cars, another of his true loves. In fact, when Andretti talked to Patrick O'Brien at Kyalami in 1979, nodding towards the Lotus team personnel, Mario said: "Don't tell these guys, but nothing compares with the excitement of driving Sprint Cars, lifting the inside front wheel with the Chevy's torque!"

With the help of his long-time sponsor Brown & Williamson (his helmet design is inspired by the Viceroy cigarette brand image), Mario also turned his attention to the 1974 F5000 Championship, sanctioned jointly by USAC and the SCCA. He has finished second overall in a Lola Chevrolet. And in endurance racing, Mario and Arturo Merzario won the 1000 km race at Monza from pole position in an Alfa Romeo 33TT. The partnership with Parnelli Jones nonetheless culminated in a return to Formula 1. For the last two events of 1974, held in North America, a newly-formed Vels Parnelli Team entered one promisingly looking Ford-powered VPJ4 car for Mario. The result was a fine seventh place on the debut in Canada, but on his home soil, Mario was disqualified for a push-start.

The car had definitely shown promise though, and the team was back competing in 12 of the 14 races of the 1975 Formula 1 season. However, the best results were a fourth in Sweden, a fifth in France, and a fastest lap in the tragic Spanish Grand Prix. The car had potential, but Parnelli Jones' insistence on continuing to race the Eagle Offenhauser in the USAC IndyCar, while also preparing specials for the Baja 1000 off-road race, meant that the results suffered across the board. Mario's biggest success came again in the American F5000 series, where he has repeated as vice-Champion with Lola Chevrolet.

Mario Andretti and Colin Chapman would meet once again late in 1975, when both their careers were 'down'. Still determined to achieve and still believing in each other's abilities, Andretti re-joined Lotus for 1976. In order to fulfil his commitment before Parnelli withdrew from Formula 1, Mario raced for the nearly-defunct team at Kyalami and Long Beach, earning Parnelli's last point for sixth place in South Africa. He would also miss the Monaco Grand Prix to attend the Indy 500, where he was fastest in qualifying, but due to the particularities of the Speedway rules, started the race from 19th and finished eighth in a McLaren Offenhauser. At Lotus, with the established Ronnie Peterson departing for March early in the season, new teammate Gunnar Nilsson and Mario drove the innovative Lotus 77 Ford that could be adjusted for the specifics of various race tracks. The team improved slowly but surely as 1976 progressed. After an impressive drive at Zandvoort, Mario earned his first podium of the year, nonetheless, his young teammate already had a pair of third place trophies to his credit, so things looked quite equal at Lotus. However, that was before Mario won the ultimate round in Japan. The race started controversially in monsoon conditions, and was one of the most chaotic ever. So much so, in fact, that when it was over, James Hunt (McLaren M23 Ford) did not know that he had finished third and therefore has clinched the Championship title. Actually believing that he lost after a late pitstop, Hunt allegedly punched his team principal in the face when he ran over to congratulate him. The defending World Champion and current points leader Niki Lauda parked his Ferrari 312T2 on the third lap, claiming that driving in such atrocious conditions was simply way too dangerous. Yet the race was allowed to run its full course of 73 laps. Eventually, only Mario was able to preserve his tyres while running at competitive pace throughout the changing track conditions, and was rewarded with a dominant win. His Lotus Ford finished as the only car on the lead lap. The nine points boosted Mario to a clear sixth in the final standings, and the future looked bright... for a change.

For 1977 the Lotus team produced the trend-setting model 78, which used a curved underside, directing airflow to enhance cornering speeds by literally sucking the car to the ground. Lotus were front-runners again, Mario taking four wins, Nilsson one. But it could have been even better than that. In Mario's hands, the 78 chassis was most likely good enough to win the title. But the mistake he and Chapman had made that year (and later admitted), was their insistence on the latest development Ford engines from Cosworth. Those were more powerful, but also more fragile and of the 17 Grand Prix, Andretti would retire six times with engine-related breakdowns. Nowhere was this more painfully obvious than at Mosport Park where, after Hunt's retirement, Mario led the field by over a lap and decided to slow down in order to preserve his equipment. Still, his engine expired with only three laps to go, giving the win, and a second place in the Championship, to Jody Scheckter in a Wolf WR1 Ford. Mario finished third overall but, in spite of some disappointment, he was able to fulfil a life-long dream by winning at Monza in front of the Italian crowd. Across the pond, Mario had another frustrating race at the Speedway, finishing 26th in the Indy 500 in McLaren Cosworth.

For 1978 Peterson returned to Lotus and many expected that he would have superior race speed, in the beautiful and dominant JPS Lotus 79 Ford, which he had extensively tested already since 1977. The American's greater car set-up and racing skills ensured that he won the qualifying, 11 to three, and scored wins at six to two. The season itself was, of course, a great triumph and an enormous tragedy at the same time. Mario secured the title at Monza, where he crossed the finish line first, but was classified sixth after receiving a 60-second penalty for a jump-start, although most agreed that the starter was to blame for messing up the procedure. Prior to that, Ronnie Peterson had suffered his ultimately fatal injuries, although during the evening hours after the Grand Prix, the word still was that he would recover. Jean Pierre Jarier was recruited to team-up with Andretti for the North American finale, but in spite of his enthusiasm to finally drive a winning car, neither the new World Champion nor the team had the strength or motivation to put forward their best effort anymore. The drivers would claim one pole position each, with Jarier also claiming fastest race lap, but there were no more point-scoring finishes. Due to his full-time Formula 1 commitments, Mario was forced to compromise the Indy 500 qualifying, which meant that for the Memorial Day classic he had to start last, from 33rd position. His Penske Cosworth was not running at the finish, but was classified 12th. During the USAC IndyCar season he at least managed to win a race in New Jersey.

Colin Chapman, who had just started the ground effects revolution in F1, announced that his new car would make Lotus 79 look obsolete. And indeed, Lotus 80 Ford appeared even smoother and more elegant than its predecessor, but this time Chapman went too far. The car produced so much downforce that it proved to be too slow in straight-line, and generally difficult to drive and handle even for such masters as the reigning World Champion and his new teammate Carlos Reutemann. The team tried to work the problems out as the season progressed, while racing the old 79s in most races, and the situation was reflected in the performance. Reutemann's pair of second places were the best Lotus showings in the 15 races of 1979. Other teams, of course, were happy to take full advantage of Chapman's mistake, and Ligier, Ferrari, and Williams had won all the races except the French Grand Prix, which gloriously belonged to the turbocharged Renault. Mario concluded the season with a single podium in Spain. And for the only time in his 30-year IndyCar career he missed the Indy 500, because it was held on the same day as the Monaco Grand Prix. This meant that of the total 1,902 laps run at the Speedway during the 1970s, Andretti completed only 792. The small consolation was that Mario won the 1979 International Race of Champions series, which included drivers from various forms of racing in identical Chevrolet Camaro cars.