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

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

For 1980, Mario appeared to have lost some spark, enduring the endless travel schedule. He was now forty and had 20 plus years racing career behind him. In Formula 1, he continued with Lotus, which was back with new Lotus 81 Ford and a new sponsor, Essex Petroleum. His new and much younger team-mate was Elio de Angelis. However, the team was unable to capitalise on the promising start, and both drivers struggled to score points, Mario especially. Nine of his 14 starts ended in early retirements and he would score only a single championship point at the season finale in Watkins Glen. His return to the Speedway was no more satisfying, as his race in Penske Chevrolet ended after 71 laps.

Disillusioned with Lotus, Mario joined Alfa Romeo for 1981. After a couple of difficult seasons and the loss of Patrick Depailler, there were hopeful signs when Bruno Giacomelli put the car on pole position for the final race in 1980 at Watkins Glen. In order to keep moving forward, team leader Carlo Chiti wanted Andretti for his development skills. But it did not work. The engineers were unable to trim the Tipo 179C and the overweight car was off-pace all year, aero development did not matter. Both drivers could only manage sporadic results. His heart no longer in it, Mario turned his full attention to IndyCar racing. And it was at the Speedway where Mario in Wildcat Cosworth was declared winner of the 1981 Indy 500. Bobby Unser was disqualified for passing under yellow. However, five months later USAC reinstated Unser and penalised him with a monetary fine (USD40,000) instead. It is suggested that in the chaotic conditions Andretti might have passed someone under yellow as well, but he was neither disqualified nor penalised, yet was officially classified second. Despite this disappointment, Mario's attention was again focused on North America.

So, Mario's Formula 1 career was now over.... or so we thought. In the turmoil of the 1982 season, beset with feuding between FISA and FOCA, the sudden retirements of Alan Jones and Reutemann, and tragic Gilles Villeneuve and Didier Pironi crashes, Mario received two telephone calls. Frank Williams offered him FW07C for the Grand Prix at Long Beach, where Mario climbed from 14th on the grid to ninth before touching a wall to retire with damaged suspension. For the Italian Grand Prix at Monza in September, the call came from Commendatore Enzo Ferrari himself. The 42-year-old Mario was new to F1 turbo-cars, and up against some fast and talented young drivers in competitive cars; Nelson Piquet, Alain Prost, Rene Arnoux and Keke Rosberg. Still, against all expectations, the 'old man' put the Ferrari 126C2 on pole position. Unfortunately, his car suffered a sticking throttle from the start and Mario was able to nurse it to third place. He drove the Ferrari again on the Las Vegas parking lot, where he qualified seventh and retired on lap 27 with broken suspension. For all practical purposes, his Formula 1 career went from pole position in a Lotus Ford at age 28 years and seven months, to a pole position for his 1982 finale in a turbo-charged Ferrari at age 42 years and seven months. Twelve wins, 18 pole positions and 10 fastest race laps in 128 GP starts. In spite of the fact that for years he would only be in Formula 1 on a part-time basis, Andretti became one of the legends in the history of the World Championship.

Free of Formula 1 and secure in CART IndyCar, Mario turned his attention to the last unconquered milestone.... the 24-hour classic at Le Mans, which he previously contested in 1966 and 1967 without much success. He would team-up with his son Michael for the race in 1982 in a Mirage Ford, but the officials decided to exclude the car on technical grounds just an hour before the start! This,

only weeks after another disappointment at the Speedway, where Mario's Wildcat Cosworth became one of the cars eliminated in the formation lap crash.

It all finally came together in 1983, when Mario entered into partnership with US Lola importer Carl Haas and actor Paul Newman at Newman/Haas Racing. Mario would finish third in CART point standings with two race wins in 13 starts with Lola Cosworth. And although he was unlucky in the Indy 500 once again, his return to Le Mans was a great success. Together with son Michael and Philippe Alliot, they brought their Kremer Porsche to third place in the general classification.

It was even better in 1984. In 16 races, Mario took six victories and, although mechanical troubles stopped him early at the Indy 500, at the season's end he would be the IndyCar Champion for the fourth time, driving Lola Cosworth. Mario would come close to winning the Indy 500 in 1985 when, after a race-long battle with Danny Sullivan, involving Sullivan's famous spin in turn four on lap 120 that both cars miraculously survived, he would finish a disappointed second. In the Championship, Mario was fifth with three race wins. Fifth again in 1986 with two wins, Mario reminded everyone that he still was a fierce racer on 15 June at Portland, Oregon. His son Michael exited the last corner in the lead, but Mario beat him at the finish line by 0.07 seconds! "Of course, he deserved to win, but I took it," he would say later with an innocent smile and a sparkle in his eye. Defeated Michael could do nothing but to wish his dad a 'Happy Father's Day'.

After being unlucky at the Speedway the year before, Mario put his Lola Chevrolet on pole position for the 1987 running of the Indy 500. But the luck was once again not with him, as his engine expired 20 laps before finish, when Mario was comfortably in the lead. He took two other wins for sixth place overall. In 1988 he would be fifth again with two race wins, and bad luck at the Speedway. With son Michael and nephew John, Mario would lead this family squad to a sixth place finish at Le Mans in a factory Porsche 962C.

Sixth in the CART IndyCar Championship in 1989 with no race wins and a fourth place in the Indy 500, as Mario completed 30 years of competitive racing. Although the race wins had eluded him, Mario, now aged 50, would still figure strongly in the Championship standings, seventh in 1990 and 1991 and sixth in 1992. His bad luck at the Speedway became legendary, though he started from the front row in 1991, but the worst came in 1992. Mario crashed on cold tyres, injuring his feet and only a few laps later his youngest son Jeff hit the wall hard and severely injured both legs. They ended up in the Indianapolis Methodist Hospital, as Michael continued to drive and dominate the race. But there was no consolation as Michael's Lola Cosworth lost fuel pressure on lap 190. Nephew John finished in eighth place, but overall, it was a very dark day for the Andrettis.

Things turned out better in the following year. Mario saw Michael off to partner Ayrton Senna in McLaren MP4/8 Ford in Formula 1, and he was paired with the current Formula 1 Champion Nigel Mansell at Newman/Haas, driving Lola Cosworth. The older man stood up to the challenge, winning the race at Phoenix, Arizona on 4 April, and taking pole position for the 500-mile race at Michigan International Speedway. He also led most laps during the Indy 500, but finished fifth, only seconds after the victorious Emerson Fittipaldi. Although his teammate won the CART IndyCar title that year, Mario finished a strong sixth in points. The incredible span between his first and last major race win amounts to no less than 33 years and 337 days. Meanwhile, Michael's stint in Formula 1 was short-lived and less successful, but he did achieve a podium finish at Monza.

At this time, Mario felt that perhaps he had done enough and 1994 would be his farewell 'Arrivederci Mario' tour. Commemorated, among other things, by his own special brand of California wine, the year reflected on a career that will most likely remain unparalleled for all time. Mario drove in all 16 races and finished a very respectable 14th in the field of 54 drivers, with one podium. His career IndyCar record stands at an amazing 407 starts, 52 victories and 67 pole positions.

Even though Mario was officially retired, one thing was still on the table, the 24 Hours at Le Mans. Mario returned to the Circuit de la Sarthe in 1995 to co-drive a Courage C34 Porsche with Bob Wollek and Eric Hellary. They were the dominant car, but the team had lost way too much time with repairs and in the end the trio would finish second, a lap down on the winners in a McLaren BMW. The prize for a WSC class win was small consolation compared to what could and perhaps should have been. Mario would drive in the race with Courage for the two following years, but without success. His last attempt came in 2000 with the promising Panoz team, but that was not very realistic as the car was not up to it. Together with Jan Magnussen and David Brabham, the team finished 15th after a first encouraging but ultimately troublesome run.

But it was still not quite over yet. In 2003 at the age of 63, Mario agreed to participate in a test session leading to the Indy 500 running at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. His son Michael was now a successful team owner in the IRL version of IndyCar, and bit short on drivers, after his regular Tony Kanaan was injured in a crash. Although he had not driven on the Speedway in a decade and was totally unfamiliar with the modern Andretti/Green Racing Dallara Honda, Mario would quickly turn in extremely competitive laps and there was no doubt that he would have no trouble in qualifying for the race, should he choose to go for it. With only minutes left in the session, Kenny Brack crashed just in front of him and Mario collected a large piece of debris at full speed. His car performed a series of rapid somersaults and nearly flew over the protective fence, before landing back on the track. Fortunately, Mario walked away from the scene with only bumps and bruises but, needless to say, decided against any comeback. In 2006 Mario was instrumental in arranging a Formula 1 test with Honda RA106 for his grandson Marco. The running took place in December at the Jerez circuit, but without much enthusiasm from either side. Marco quickly returned to Indycar, and the Andretti clan lost its chance at becoming the first three-generation family in Formula 1, this went to the Pilettes.

Unbelievably, in the spring of 2011 news broke out that Mario Andretti had conceded to be tempted to make a one-off return to the IndyCar series. The reason was the special USD5 million prize offer to any non-IndyCar regular who could win the season finale at the Las Vegas Speedway. The intention was to attract high-profile personalities and celebrities from the world of racing and beyond, a marketing initiative to boost IndyCar's dwindling popularity. Mario's friend Paul Newman was 80 when he raced in the Daytona 24 classic in 2005. Furthermore, an exciting possibility existed that three generations of Andrettis, Mario, Michael and Marco, could compete alongside one another in the same event. Other hints surfaced for those who wanted to believe. Las Vegas was to be

Marco's 100th start in IndyCar. Lotus Club of America announced that they would offer their members an 'unique experience' during the race weekend. Las Vegas Speedway was one of the premier locations for the 'Mario Andretti Racing Experience' where anybody 18 years of age with a driver's license can drive a full-size Indy-style race car, or ride as a passenger in a two-seat IndyCar.

In the end, it all turned out differently. In a blow to IndyCar's popularity, one of its brightest marketing stars, Danica Patrick, announced a switch to NASCAR for 2012, and the only driver eligible to win the USD5 million bonus was the two-time Indy 500 winner and former series Champion, Dan Wheldon. But he would be stretched as Wheldon had not come out of retirement and had trouble putting together a full-time campaign in 2011. In the race, things got much worse yet. On the 1.5-mile oval no less than 34(!) cars took the green flag and on lap 12, 15 of them became involved in a chain accident. Several caught fire, while few more went airborne, most hitting the uncompromising wall. Four drivers were airlifted to hospital, where less than two hours later Wheldon died from his injuries. Andretti was one of those who watched the tragedy unfold from the pit wall, and also among the selected few who privately learned about Wheldon's death from the IndyCar management, before this news was released to the general media.

But not to end on a low note, let's turn our attention to the fact that at 80-years-old (on 28 February 2020), Mario still regularly drives race cars. In 2015, Verizon IndyCar (now NTT IndyCar) introduced a new public initiative 'Indy Racing Experience' that provides an opportunity for selected guests and some lucky fans to take a few laps in the two-seat special. Andretti was selected as the driver for this programme. And to remind everybody that he still loves the speed and is not just driving around at some leisurely pace, in June last year at the Texas Motor Speedway, Mario spun coming through turn two and touched the wall.

And finally, this might still be an open-ended story. In one of the interviews he gave during his last active season in 1994, Andretti noted that if he is still breathing at 80, then Le Mans will remain an option. So, perhaps we should stay tuned? But more seriously, there seems to be a real chance of the Andretti name returning to F1, as Michael is allegedly looking to buy a controlling stake in one of the teams, perhaps as early as this year. Stay tuned indeed....

During and after his career, Mario Andretti was bestowed with numerous awards and various Hall of Fame inductions, the most significant of these honours include:-

Race Car Driver of the 20th Century by the Associated Press.

'Commendatore dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana' from the Italian government. The only other motor sport personality ever honoured with this title, which provides the right to be called Commendatore, was Enzo Ferrari.

FIA Gold Medal for Motorsport.

Living Legend Award by the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

World Sport Legend Award by WSLA Monaco.

American Motorsport Hall of Fame, International Motorsport Hall of Fame, FIA Hall of Fame.