

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

MARIO ANDRETTI

Mario Gabriel Andretti was born on February 29, 1940, in Montona, near Trieste, Italy, the son of a farm administrator. Following the war, which took everything from the senior Andretti, Mario and his twin brother, Aldo, spent part of their childhood in a displaced-persons camp. At age 13, with their father having found work in a toy factory, Mario and Aldo entered the Formula Junior class of racing in Ancona, Italy. In 1955, his parents had immigrated to America and the boys' dreams of becoming Grand Prix drivers when they grew up seemed dead. Their new home was in Nazareth (PA), where their uncle lived and worked in the mills.

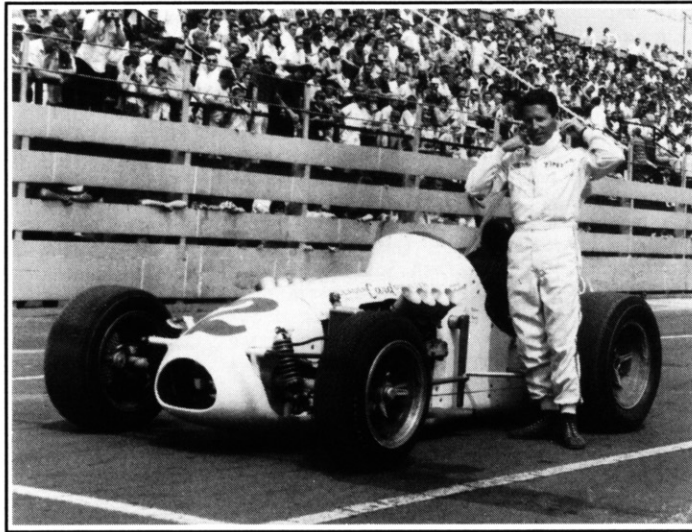
In 1958, Mario and Aldo raced for the first time in the United States driving modified stock cars or jalopies, without their parents' knowledge. Mario's first car was a 1948 Hudson Hornet painted a bright "Ferrari Red" and he raced it at the old Nazareth Speedway, a half-mile dirt track. While Mario won over twenty races in the next three years in the sportsman division, Aldo crashed repeatedly. The first time Aldo was hurt is when the elder Andretti found out about their adventures and, needless to say, he was not amused."

According to Mario, "Aldo and I were winning the stock cars. But my objective was to get into single-seaters. The only way I saw that I could get a ride in something like a midget was to get exposed. Well, in those days, the three-quarter midget races in the winter were a great time to be seen by some of the top midget owners.

Mario raced T.Q. midgets, and full midgets with the American Racing Drivers Club (ARDC), on the East Coast in 1961-63. His most famous midget racing accomplishment came in the Bill and Ed Mataka number 33 midget, the Jersey Speed & Marine Offy out of Maplewood (NJ). It was a top-notch car, and on Labor Day of '63, Mario won three ARDC features in it at two different tracks - an afternoon program at Flemington (NJ) and an evening doubleheader at Hatfield (PA). To this day, the Mataka Brothers' cars carry the number "3n1" to celebrate Mario's achievement. Mario has said, "I will never forget that on my slowdown lap, I could hear a comment made by Chris Economaki, who was announcing at Hatfield. You know how he's got that piercing voice? Well, he said, 'Mario, with this feature win, it looks to me like you just bought the ticket to the big-time'. That still rings. I will never forget that."

The next rung in the Eastern Seaboard game was to move from ARDC to the United Racing Club

(URC) sprint cars, and then to the United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car division if you were really lucky and talented. However, Mario once commented, "URC was one club where I had no luck at all. Nobody would give me a ride. I don't think I got my fair due there. It was the only time in my career when I really chased after rides that I couldn't get. I drove overnight one time from up in Canada to Williams Grove, Pennsylvania, hoping to get a URC ride, and I came home empty-handed, just totally dejected. So almost right from midgets, I decided to bypass URC altogether and started looking at USAC."



Mario Andretti

(Bruce Craig Collection)

USAC sprint car owner Rufus Gray had seen Mario Andretti drive in ARDC competition while he was crewing for an Indy car team out East and he was duly impressed. Through the grapevine, Gray offered Andretti a ride in his Gapco sprinter in 1964. Commented Andretti, "That put me right where I wanted to be. Right with the big boys."

USAC sprint car rookie Andretti was edged out in 1964 by Don Branson in the Jud Phillips Wynn's Friction Proofing Special and Jud Larson in a variety of cars: the Jack Colvin K.E.Y. Special, the A. J. Foyt Traco Engineering Special, and the A. J. Watson Special. However, he did capture the prestigious "Joe James-Pat O'Connor Memorial" race at Salem (IN) Speedway.

1964 was also a notable year for Mario for two other reasons - he became a naturalized American citizen on April 15th, and on April 19th he started his first National Championship race for Indianapolis-type cars at the Sam Nunis-promoted New Jersey State Fairgrounds in Trenton. He accomplished his mission by finishing the race in the Doug Stearly Motor Freight Special. His second race was in Lee Glessnor's car at Langhorne

(PA), with Tommy Hinnershitz serving as his pit crew. Things really started happening for him, though, when his sprint car owner Rufus Gray introduced Mario to veteran Indy mechanic Clint Brawner by saying, "This is the boy who drives my sprint car."

Brawner, thinking of the drivers (Stan Bowman, Donnie Davis, Chuck Hulse) that had just lost their lives in sprints, responded, "Sprint car is a dirty word around here."

However, after Chris Economaki of National Speed Sport News recommended young Andretti, and after Brawner himself saw Mario in action at Terre Haute (IN) in the Gapco Special, he was convinced that he had found his new driver for the Al Dean Van Lines Special. They placed eleventh that year in National Championship division points. Andretti and Brawner wound up staying together six years during which time Mario won three USAC National Championship titles, was runner-up twice, and won thirty races including the 1969 Indianapolis 500.

In 1965, Mario won once at Ascot Park in Gardena (CA), and finished tenth in USAC national sprint car points behind Johnny Rutherford, Greg Weld, Bobby Unser, Jud Larson, Roger McCluskey, Don Branson, Al Smith, Carl Williams and Red Reigel.

However, it was another incredible year for him as he finished third at the Indianapolis 500 and earned "Rookie of the Year" honors, won his first National Championship event (on a road course at the Indianapolis Raceway Park), and he won the USAC National Championship point title. He also placed 12th in the USAC Stock Car division point standings.

Roger McCluskey in the Clarence "Mutt" Anderson H&H Machine Tool Special won the 1966 USAC sprint car title over Mario, Bobby Unser, Don Branson and Larry Dickson. Mario captured five USAC wins that season at Cumberland (MD), where roll cages made their first appearance ever in USAC competition, and at Oswego (NY), Rossburg (OH), Salem (IN) and Phoenix (AZ). The Salem win was again in the rich "Joe James-Pat O'Connor" Memorial race and, as they all did, it came aboard the Wally Meskowski Wynn's Special.

Andretti also captured the pole position at Indy in '66 and he went on to claim eight of the 15 races in the National Championship series and his second straight title. He won his only career USAC midget win at Marne (MI).

(Mario Andretti Bio Continued Below)

In 1967, Mario Andretti won the famed Daytona 500 for National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) stock cars. He followed it up with a win at the Sebring (FL) 12-Hour Endurance Race, partnering with the late Bruce McLaren. He also won another eight races in 19 National Championship starts but lost the title to rival A. J. Foyt, Jr. As far as USAC sprint car racing went in '67, Mario only entered three events in the Leader Card Special, but he scored two wins at Oswego Speedway and finished fifth in his other start. He finished the year seventh in USAC stock car points with one win and he continued to race midgets as his schedule permitted. At Indy, he again sat on the pole position.

One year later, Mario finished second in the National Championship points to Bobby Unser, although he captured four more wins. He also took a step closer to realizing his boyhood dream of being world champion by starting his first Formula One event at Watkins Glen (NY).

In 1969, Andretti again was the USAC National Champion, taking nine wins on the circuit, includ-

ing the Indianapolis 500 aboard Andy Granatelli's Clint Brawner-wrenched STP Oil Treatment Special. In '70, he finished fifth with one win and was elected to the Hoosier Auto Racing Fans (HARF) Hall of Fame. In 1971, he claimed the South African Formula One Grand Prix. In 1972, he placed eleventh in the National Championship points and won four endurance sports car events.

In 1973, when USAC split its National Championship series between dirt and pavement, Mario finished fifth in points with one win on the asphalt and he tied for second place with a pair of wins on dirt.

One year later, he was the USAC dirt track champion with three wins. He also captured three USAC stock car wins on road courses. In 1975, he won another four USAC stock car events on road courses. By this time Mario Andretti was focusing nearly all of his energies on road racing. In 1978, he became only the second American ever to claim the Formula One World Drivers Championship. In 1984, Mario captured the Championship Auto

Racing Teams (CART) PPG Cup and his fourth national driving title.

Speaking of sprint car racing, Mario said in 1975, "You break your bones in that type of racing, I'll tell you. Sprint car racing is lethal, challenging racing. I love it. But I'm more conservative now. There was a certain plateau I reached in sprint car racing where I really didn't give a damn what happened or even what the car looked like - as long as it had four wheels and a steering wheel, man, I was gonna drive it!"

The retired three-time "Driver of the Year" (1967, 1978 and 1984) is married to wife Dee Ann and has three children: Michael, Jeffery and Barbara. Michael is a former CART champion, while Jeff won the "Rookie of the Year" honors at Indianapolis in 1991.