

Mario Gabriel Andretti, whose initials stand for auto-racing's Majorly Great Ace, retired from the track in 1994, but not before screaming his way past the checkered flag – in first place – in some of the world's most prestigious races: the USAC Championship car race (1965-66, 1969), the Daytona Beach stock car race (1967); the Sebring Grand Prix sports-car race (1967, 1970); the Indianapolis 500 (1969); and the Formula 1 world driving championship (1978). Italian by birth, competitive by nature, and defined by an extraordinary skill for speed, Andretti, 62, has slowed down long enough in life to raise three children (racer son Michael placed 7th in May's Indy 500), become grandfather to five, and involve himself in a long line of absorbing business ventures, among them the Andretti Winery; Andretti Petroleum; the auto dealerships Andretti Toyota, Andretti Nissan, and Andretti Mitsubishi; Andretti video games, go-kart tracks, car washes, books, apparel and an IMAX film. Andretti and his family make their home in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, the same town in which he was raised and together with his twin brother, Aldo, hand-built at age 19 the Hudson stock car that would ignite his passion for driving – fast – and thus determine his destiny.

Pilot Michael recently caught up with the year 2000's "driver of the century," an aviator who flies his own ultralights but leaves the left-seat of his Jetstar 731 to a professional pilot. As he says: "I've always known if I got my ticket I'd be tempted to fly when tired and in a rush, and with my family...well, they have the last word. At the controls of a plane is not where I'm going to be pushing the envelope." Charming, witty, as cocksure as he is self-effacing, the surprisingly soft-spoken Andretti graciously shared some of his thoughts with our intrepid flyer, his accent still liltingly Italian even after almost 50 years in this country. Their conversation follows:

Pilot Michael: Mr. Andretti, it is an honor to speak with you, sir. After all, you are a veritable sports legend, admired around the world for your stunning racing achievements. Tell me, are you comfortable in the role of living legend?

Mario Andretti: Why shouldn't I be? (laughs) Oh, I don't know if I deserve it, but I do appreciate the accolades.

PM: So, what are you driving these days, you know, to tool around town in, go to the grocery store, and so forth. I mean, you can't really take your Indy-winning Hawk or Lotus 79 out to the movies, right?

Mario: I have a Corvette C506 and a Lamborghini Diablo.

PM: Do you obey the speed limit?

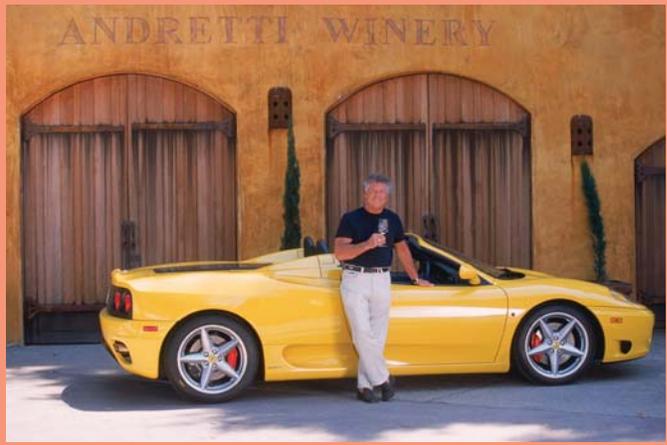
Mario: Well, if I want to go fast I fly – my Jetstar. It's a great plane and very convenient! I love it because it has improved the quality of my life. I can do so much work in so many different places and no hassle! I can be anywhere and get home just like that.

PM: That means that a typical Saturday night would find you...

Mario: At a fine restaurant. Or else with my son at one of his competitions. I go to almost all his races. I'm very proud and, as you can imagine, I am his biggest supporter.

PM: Sounds like a devoted father. Which makes me wonder, what do you most hope your children have learned from you?

Mario: To be a decent example of a man with principle. A man who obviously appreciates the things we are able to enjoy in life, the wonderful things we should



never take for granted. I think my kids have come through in fine fashion. All have goals they are working toward. I'm so proud.

PM: And what trait do you pray they have not inherited from you?

Mario: My impatience.

PM: You always have liked to hurry-up and smoke across that finish line first. So what, may I ask, drives you? Is it power? glory? greed? ego? fear?

Mario: It's a little of everything. Ultimately, the satisfaction of a sense of accomplishment – and defying a few odds. Just trying to do things in a meaningful way. I consider myself very lucky. I have friends, I know people who have a very normal, even enviable life and to me it seems quite boring. To play it safe all the time has got to be pretty boring!

PM: Obviously, you have managed to leave "boring" way behind back in the early laps of your very competitive life. So what do you do for fun? What's your idea of a great vacation?

Mario: I'm not an expert! I'm still waiting to experience a real vacation, perfect or not. There has to be something interesting to it, not just sit around doing not much of anything and calling it rest. Boring! But I suspect there are certain places in the world...like a no-hurry journey through Italy. Driving, but for once, no rush: up the Amalfi Coast, through Rome, Sienna, Florence, Portofino, winding up at the Villa d'Este at Lake Como. From there fly to Rio de Janeiro and then the Greek islands...

PM: Sounds very romantic, which reminds me. What to you is the best quality in a woman?

Mario: Obviously, to be not so moody. Obviously, a woman who enjoys some humor. I love an intelligent lady, that just rounds it out.

PM: You said nothing about her having to be beautiful.

Mario: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Most women in the world are beautiful.

PM: Since we're on the topic, what is it about you that makes women fall?

Mario: Me? I wish! I have never felt that women are interested in me in any unusual way. I'm realistic!

PM: Or perhaps just happily married. You have been spoken for by the same wonderful woman, Dee Ann, for 41 years. What's your secret?

Mario: It's just believing in the vows to begin with. There are so many ups and downs that obviously, on all sides, you must possess tolerance. More than anything, there has to be love in there.

PM: I have to assume then, that that is how you approach your many and varied business ventures, like your winery. What's the hardest thing for you about retirement from the track?

Mario: For me, the extreme change in my planning of every day. There's a sense of self-discipline that I don't have to be concerned with any more. You can miss a day of work but you can never miss a race and I love that! I would have made a good military commander, a sergeant maybe,

because of the self-discipline. Or a fighter pilot! I am positive that if I weren't a race car driver I'd have been a fighter pilot – a damn good one. I have taken the controls of an F15, F16 and 111 supersonic and you're up there, free as a bird... That's who I have the greatest admiration and respect for: military pilots.

PM: Sounds like challenge, speed and more than a little love of danger haven't loosened their grip on you one bit. Is there a life dream you'd still like to realize?

Mario: I have no real life dreams I haven't already lived, since we all dream of a long, healthy life after retiring from meaningful activities.

PM: Secretly?

Mario: Well, in the back of my mind...as a good thing for me...I'd like to drive 24 hours of LeMans and win it! I've come close but never won. I'm still keeping the option open.

PM: Any other secrets we should know? Like, is there some skill you possess that people would be surprised to hear about?

Mario: I have a lot of perseverance in pursuit of my goals. I undertake situations, especially in business, where there are risks. I enjoy challenges.

PM: I'm not so sure the world doesn't see that already, so let me ask you this, what will you never, ever give up?

Mario: My pet pig, Martini. I'd give up my Lamborghini before I'd give up Martini; I love him very, very much. He's a wonderful pet. My favorite thing – I insist! – is to get up in the morning and feed the animals – my basset hound Copper and Gonzo, the parrot I've had for 20 years. It's quiet in the morning room and I love feeding the animals and waiting for the bird to ask Martini if he'd like to go out. I won't let any housekeeper do this; it's something I love.

PM: Right. So, all in all, given the phenomenal success you've achieved in racing, the Andretti name you have glorified, what is it your mother never expected you to do?

Mario: My mother Rina is 89 and lives nearby. She has always been my biggest supporter. In fact, it was because of my parents and their confidence in me and my brother Aldo that I've been able to pursue a life of intense competition. To my mother, no one else ever has or ever will do as well as my brother and me; obviously (laughs), I have no problem with her defending her position, that I can do no wrong!

PM: I'm sure there are many of your fans who will never argue with that. Thank you, Mr. Andretti, it has been a pleasure. I wish you the best and, as always, look forward to your keeping up your speed. All the better if that means victory at Le Mans!

Mario Andretti



Aviator, Racing Legend

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From left to right clockwise:

Mario and son Michael Andretti.

Mario with his Lamborghini and his winery in the Napa Valley. Mario at the 2002 Long Beach Grand Prix.

Mario with his two race machines.

Michael Andretti winning the 2002 Long Beach Grand Prix.