

## Andretti christens Monticello track

*Legendary driver calls it 'paradise'*



Mario Andretti, front, and Brian Redman take off during the grand opening of the Monticello Motor Club on Sunday. The 4.1-mile track is built on top of the old Monticello Airport.

**By Nathan Mayberg**

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MONTICELLO — He is considered by many to be the greatest race car driver of all-time.

And on Sunday, Mario Andretti was in Sullivan County talking about his life's passion.

As Ferraris and Porches lined up at the grand opening of the private Monticello Motor Club track, Andretti's Lotus 79 was at the front. It was the same model he used to capture the Formula One world championship in 1978.

Next to his car was the blue and orange Porsche 908 of Brian Redman, just like the one he drove to victory in the 1970 Targa Florio, formerly the world's oldest sports car racing event.

In 1955, Andretti and his family arrived in Nazareth, Pa., and have never left. He and his twin brother, Aldo, built their first car there and had success overnight. Aldo suffered a brutal accident in 1959, but that didn't stop the two from racing.

"You're driven by such passion," Mario said. "I don't think there is anything that can set you back. Over the years, I lost a lot of friends in this business. I didn't have a death wish. I just wanted to race. The risk is worth the reward."

Andretti has helped lead his son, Michael, and his grandson, Marco, to great successes on the track. He hopes the talented 21-year-old Marco can become the next American to win a Formula One race.

Asked why no American has won a race in the prestigious Formula One series since he did it 30 years ago, Andretti cited the numerous lucrative races here in the United States.

"America has so much to offer professional racing drivers that they don't have to go (overseas)," he said.

Andretti, who led a procession of drivers around the Monticello Motor Club track for two laps on Sunday, and topped out at nearly 170 mph down the straightaway, called the course "really challenging."

The 4.1-mile track, built on top of the old Monticello Airport, is one of the longest in the country and features 22 turns, many of them quite sharp. It is designed so that it can be reconfigured in 12 different ways.

The track will be open daily beginning Thursday, except for Tuesdays. Twenty-five full-time employees have been hired, as well as 35 seasonal employees. The track will be closed between November and April. The club also will be constructing two new pavilions and a permanent clubhouse.

The club has signed up nearly 125 members at a yearly fee of \$7,500 and for an initiation fee of \$125,000.

"It's going to go up to \$150,000," said its president, William McMichael.

Chris and Nick Cognella of New Canaan, Conn., are members.

"Everybody finds releases in different ways," Nick said. "For some, it's reading a book. Unfortunately for me, it's not reading a book."

The Cognellas drive a Lotus Exige Cup 240, which can only be driven legally on a racetrack.

Andretti said he expects the club to "help the economy in this area tremendously. ... This is a car enthusiast's paradise."

Locals are hoping he is right. Ken Schultz of Forestburgh thinks it could be a boost to the local real estate market for second homes.

"What they've done is very impressive," Schultz said. "The money they've put in and the resources are very impressive. It can only be a plus."

Schultz was one of many locals taking a ride around the track in Cadillacs provided by the club.

Nobody was luckier than Bridget Ellis of Tennessee, who traveled up to be with her boyfriend, Michael Marsal of Westchester County. She asked Andretti for a ride around the track. Andretti obliged and took her in a Cadillac, but it ran out of gas midway through the course.