



A LAP IN TIME

Submitted by Bill Thiele

In 1969, I was six years old and full of curiosity. New sights, colors and smells were always fascinating. So, when I first laid eyes on a fancy orange and white '69 Camaro Pace Car, I was enamored and attached for life. As so many of us do, I often found myself wanting to learn more and own one as time went by. I wanted to complete the "lap" to meet that first impression.

As a youngster, my father, Ralph, was always tinkering on cool cars. He had Hot Rods, GTOs, Hurst Olds' just to name a few. Along with that, his friends and his career with General Motors, I got to see amazing cars and events as a tyke. One day, a friend of his that owned a dealership was out cruising around in his new '69 Camaro Pace car. There it was in our front yard with its top down. It was his demonstrator car. What a great perk. I can still see the vibrant orange interior while looking down from my Dad's arms. As a result, as I got older, I always had a desire to own one. That desire became even more strong when I learned that Mario Andretti had won the Indy 500 in 1969 when these Camaros were the pace car.

1987, my wife, Rosemarie and I were on our honeymoon in the Pocono Mountains. We happened to see a '69 Pace Car in front of a small dealership. She thought I was nuts when I went all "gaga" over the car. Needless to say, \$12k was way too much to spend on a hobby car for newlyweds. The next opportunity came without warning again. It was late 1999 and I had already immersed myself in the collector car hobby and especially Camaros. I got a call from two of my best friends, Tim and JR. They had just returned from an auction where they scored a 21k mile Z-11 Pace Car. They said they were cleaning it up, doing minor restorations and needed help.

As they had done for me before, I carved out time to go help. By the second or third night of helping, I knew I was in “big trouble”. I had to have it. How would I convince Rosemarie? To make a long story short, the car is now known as “Kitchen”, because that is where the funds had been designated beforehand. Needless to say, my wife had a certain distain for the car ever since. The car received the “white glove” treatment and light restoration before its first big show at the 2001 Gainesville, FL Super Chevy Show. It did very well there. In the years after, I resisted the temptation to sell, driving it a bit more frequently. I finally entered it in the 2017 AACA Ocala, FL Winter National. Kitchen achieved a 1st Junior Award.

In late 2018, I began to think that Mario’s 50th Indy win anniversary was at hand. I happened to reach out to



the Indy Speedway Museum to see if he would be on hand and if there was a Pace Car reunion planned. At that time, they were very unsure. I checked several more times, and perhaps due to my urging, the reunion was announced in early 2019. I was asked for all kinds

of information about my car by the Museum’s curator, Jason Vansickle. He wanted pictures, history, VIN, cowl tag, etc. After a few weeks, I was notified that my car was accepted for display and inclusion in the reunion. I was ecstatic. I was now on the “starting grid”.

I knew there would be other car owners that would be included in the event. But how many? Over 50 years, how many prime examples of the original Z-11s would survive, much less be invited to this event?

Much to my surprise, Rosemarie was “all in” for the trip. We loaded up Kitchen into our trailer on Wednesday evening and headed out Thursday morning. We arrived in Brownsburg (Indy Suburb) on Thursday evening. Friday morning we had to be at the Museum (located inside the track near turn 2) at 10 am. Our drive there was casual and when we entered the tunnel with our Museum credentials, we felt like royalty. Once parked in the display field, we were greeted by Jason and other car owners. We were one of only about 40 ‘69 Pace Cars that had been able to attend. We wiped the car down and made our way to the hospitality tent. There was breakfast (lunch in the afternoon) and a silent auction as well. Indiana DMV had arranged to make several, autographed, special edition (usable) license plates with the “Reunion” logo available for auction. I had to have one of those too, and Rosemarie placed the first bid! We then entered the Museum itself and saw the special Mario Andretti display. From his ‘69 winning race car to his John Player Special F1 car, the Museum clearly had “pulled out all the stops”.

We made our way to the adjoining gift shop and then to the track itself to watch qualifying. What a spectacle! During the day, we visited with many other car owners and had lengthy discussion with the Curator about what ever happened to the '69 Pace Car that Mario received as part of his "winnings". No one seemed to quite know. At the end of the day, Rosemarie and I went back into the Museum to cool down and visit some more exhibits. We noticed that they were setting up for a press interview. Who could it be, we wondered? We were asked to make our way to the exit, since the Museum was about to close. On the way out, I asked one of the staff, "who were they to be interviewing?". It was Aldo, Mario's identical twin brother. Very cool, I thought. Then, I remembered, Aldo was rumored to have received Mario's '69 Pace Car gift. I had to meet Aldo!

then entered the Museum itself and saw the special Mario Andretti display. From his '69 winning race car to his John Player Special F1 car, the Museum clearly had "pulled out all the stops".

We made our way to the adjoining gift shop and then to the track itself to watch qualifying. What a spectacle! During the day, we visited with many other car owners and had lengthy discussion with the Curator about what ever happened to the '69 Pace Car that Mario received as part of his "winnings". No one seemed to quite know. At the end of the day, Rosemarie and I went back into the Museum to cool down and visit some more exhibits. We noticed that they were setting up for a press interview. Who could it be, we wondered? We were asked to make our way to the exit, since the Museum was about to close. On the way out, I asked one of the staff, "who were they to be interviewing?". It was Aldo, Mario's identical twin brother. Very cool, I thought. Then, I remembered, Aldo was rumored to have received Mario's '69 Pace Car gift. I had to meet Aldo!

However, we had to leave the building. To my surprise as we were getting ready to leave the parking lot, there he was. I "sheepishly" approached Aldo and his wife. Aldo, who in 1969 was every bit the driver (some say better than



Mario), was utilizing a walker and was obviously in pain. Nevertheless, he was as nice and cordial as anyone could hope. As his wife was helping him into Mario's V12 Audi sedan, he shared stories about his ailments, family and hopes for grandson Marco at this year's special Indy 500. He signed my original 1969 race program, personalizing it. What a thrill. He also shared very valuable information on what happened to Mario's '69 Pace Car gift. I can't tell 'ya, but I hope to help the Museum find the car now.

On Saturday, we returned to the track with our Pace Car, enjoyed more qualifying and great weather. We also witnessed a serious crash involving James Hinchcliffe. It was estimated that he hit the turn 2 wall at nearly 235 MPH. He walked away and was able to attempt another effort later in the day. The applause was resounding. As the day passed, we watched the silent auction, I received permission to bid it up and win the license plate with "500" embossed and Mario's signature. We promptly mounted the tag to the front of our car. Then, the word was passed.... It was time. It was time to line up and enter the track itself for the parade lap. The anticipation grew as we waited (seemed like forever). Then, I had a decision to make.... Top up, or top down. You see, my perfect top had not been down in well over 12 years. I got out of the car several times in fits of indecision. Finally, I said "If I am ever going to put it down again, now is the time". Rosemarie and I dropped the top and were shortly ushered to the track entrance just after turn 2. The asphalt was deep black, the walls clean (except for where Hinch hit). We proceeded down the back stretch where we were waived to by folks on the well-manicured infield golf course. Rosemarie was snapping pictures and filming the whole time. It was surreal. How fast did we go, many have asked? I can't tell 'ya that either, but I was careful.

As we went down the front stretch, we snapped pictures of the famous Pagoda, Timing Pylon and the Yard of Bricks. We approached turn 2 again and thought the ride was coming to an end. Not so! We were waived through and got a second lap.

As we exited the track with the top still down, we had to pinch ourselves. We made our way to the hotel and received many "thumbs up" along the way. I reflected on the day, my car, Aldo, my wife, my dad and my first glimpse of the '69 Pace Car all those 50 years ago. The lap in time had been completed!



STP CORPORATION BRAWNER HAWK MARK III 1969

The Brawner Hawk Mark III that Mario Andretti drove to victory in the 1969 Indianapolis 500 is one of the most famous "backup cars" in auto racing history. Andretti was forced to use the Brawner Hawk, later nicknamed "The Cinderella Car," after a fiery crash on May 21 in his primary car, a four-wheel drive Lotus Type 64 specially prepared for Indianapolis. The Brawner Hawk was a proven winner, as Andretti had driven it to victory in April at Hanford Motor Speedway in California. Despite an overheating issue, Andretti led 116 of the 200 laps to claim his only Indianapolis 500 victory. The car in the Mario Andretti: ICON exhibit is the Granatelli-built replica of the winning machine, which was donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. (On Loan From: STP Corporation)