

Honorary chairman and TAG Heuer's greatest ambassador, Jack Heuer.

Q&A



As 150th anniversary celebrations continue, *QP* talks to Jack Heuer, great-grandson of Heuer founder and honorary chairman of TAG Heuer, about his time at Heuer, his interest in motor sports and his happy return to the company he was forced to leave almost 20 years ago.

You were at the helm of Heuer throughout the 1960s when the company introduced some of its most iconic and enduring pieces. Can you tell us a little about that time?

After the Second World War things became more sophisticated and it was in the 1960s that the watch world went self-winding. At that time there were

no Swiss self-winding chronographs and as a result chronograph sales were poor. They say that invention is the mother of necessity and in our case it is true - we HAD to create a self-winding chronograph in order to survive and so we got together with Breitling and we gave the world its first one. At that time there were only about nine manufacturers making them and TAG Heuer was - and still is - one of the best.

The US was then the main market to break into but few Swiss brands sold well there. Zenith for example was prohibited from entering the market due to the American TV and radio company of the same name - the situation only changed for the brand when it became part of LVMH. The self-winding chronograph, however, allowed Heuer to break in to the US with the Carrera, the Autavia and, for those who preferred something



a little crazier, the Monaco. After that we introduced a new model every year - the Kentucky, the Monza, the Silverstone and so on.

There is a very strong link between Heuer and motor sport. How did this start?

The link goes right back to my grandfather. In 1911 he invented the first car dashboard chronograph called Time of Trip. There are very few around today - there are two in the TAG Heuer museum but we are desperately trying to find more.

Then in 1958, as a marketing project, we surveyed cars at the Monte Carlo rally and discovered that two-thirds of the vehicles used Heuer instruments. This is probably due to the fact that there were very few manufacturers plus we provided a full range of products that could be adjusted for any car or purpose.

In 1959 I was sent to the US to set up a subsidiary and through personal interest I became involved with the rallying scene there. When it comes to motor sport, the Americans are very pernickety and demand very accurate dashboard instruments - this is where we really made our transatlantic breakthrough. The Sports Car Club of

America (SCCA) asked us to provide equipment for the Sebring 12-hour race and things took off from there.

That must have opened a lot of doors in terms of marketing Heuer?

The SCCA at the time was the domain of both professional and gentlemen drivers - the Rodriguez brothers, Stirling Moss, Paul Newman - all interested in the Heuer chronograph. There was no way that the company could afford to go worldwide in terms of advertising but motor sport was a global thing and with our new connections we could go worldwide in terms of marketing.

So you asked the drivers to become early ambassadors for the brand?

Not just the drivers. While I was in America I learned to play the Hollywood game of getting a watch on to an actor's wrist. At that time prop masters on movie sets were really the people to know. A client of mine in LA introduced me to a prop master and within weeks Heuer watches were being worn in films by Jack Lemmon, Charlton Heston and Bo Derek. Lemmon loved his and asked if he could buy it. I told him the price would be a picture of him wearing it.

Is this how the relationship with Steve McQueen began?

In 1970, the prop master that I had become friendly with was working on a film about racing called *Le Mans* and he asked me to provide some watches and instruments. Steve McQueen was the star of the movie and had two tutors to help to get his driving up to scratch - Derek Bell and Jo Siffert. McQueen decided that he wanted to look like Siffert who was under contract to Heuer and that's how he first started wearing a Heuer watch.

You were at Heuer when the quartz crisis hit. How did you prepare the company for survival?

People refer to the 'quartz crisis' but in reality quartz only put us back by two years or so. The real crisis was in the decade following 1975. The Japanese had tied the



Above: Jack and his father in 1963 at the place that became his 'second home' - the Heuer workshop.

Top and bottom: Two of Heuer's most enduring models, introduced while Jack was at the helm: a 1964 Carrera and a 1962 Autavia chronograph.





Above left: An Autavia dashboard instrument from 1933. Above right: The new Pendulum Concept Watch. Right: 150 years of Heuer and TAG Heuer. Below: A 1969 Heuer Monaco.

yen to the dollar and the exchange rate on the Swiss franc dropped within seven years from 4.43 to 1.5, which effectively tripled the price of a Swiss watch in the US compared to Japanese or American timepieces. High-end mechanical pieces were no longer competitive in what had been the biggest market and US digital all but killed off the lower end. At this point the banks also started to get nervous. And on top of this came the recession and the oil crisis. The result was that we closed two subsidiaries - one in the UK.

So throughout this time what were the best and the worst moments you experienced?

This is such an easy question to answer. My best moment came on 3 March 1969 when we announced the world's first self-winding chronograph simultaneously in New York and Geneva (at 10am in the former and 5pm in the latter). Undoubtedly the worst moment came on 24 June 1982, when I was asked to resign from Heuer after an unfriendly takeover.

Now you're back at TAG Heuer. What were

you doing in the years inbetween and what brought you back?

I am a product man at heart and when I left Heuer I began working with a Chinese gentleman, helping him to develop his company. It was a fascinating experience and together we built the company - Oregon Scientific - from 150 employees to over 10,000. Eventually I felt it was time to step down - well I was 72-years-old!

When I was approached to be an ambassador for TAG Heuer it was a very emotional decision. I went away and thought about it for six months before meeting with the country managers. Although it is a big international company, it felt like a family. So many family-run businesses disappeared during the watch crisis years but after three takeovers I felt at peace with Heuer being TAG Heuer and resting in the hands of LVMH.

I love the research and development aims of the brand. TAG Heuer hires from watchmaking schools and puts new employees into product development. This is the area I most enjoy working in - in a tutor-type role.

Before I joined Heuer I had just completed my studies in electrical engineering and I have always tried to bring a dedication to precision into my working life. I am intrigued by technology and developments such as the new Pendulum - it is doubtful that it will revolutionise the Swiss watchmaking industry but it is an intellectual challenge and the industry needs projects like this to keep things fresh. ☺

