



*The Right*  
**Watchman**



On 1 June 2009, Jean-Frédéric Dufour was appointed CEO of Zenith and, in the short time since, he has streamlined the company's product lines and reinterpreted the brand's history in a more classical sense. Here, the man with degrees in business administration and industrial science tells *QP* why he still relishes the role he has made his own in less than 18 months.

### Nicholas Foulkes

For about a decade Thierry Nataf, CEO of Zenith, bestrode the watch world like a black-suited, skinny-lapelled colossus: a showman, a rock star, an example of the watch executive as a one-man, stadium-filling, super group. He ran Zenith with the full-on pageantry of a major fashion house.

Even his moments of repose were carefully choreographed; chin resting artfully on the hand in a pose that combined sultry good looks with a pensive mien and a glimpse of the Zenith at his wrist. His finely delineated features were animated by a lively intelligence, his voice by turns purringly confidential and stridently confident, his conversation punctuated by his trademark observation that his heartbeat was at the same frequency as the 36,000 vph El Primero movement. He was the apotheosis of the pre-recession watch boss, living high, living large, living the brand, living the dream.

The thing about dreams is, of course, that one wakes up and one day in the summer of 2009 Thierry Nataf woke up to find that he had resigned from Zenith. The watch world is certainly less colourful without him. Moreover he had put Zenith back on the map. Whether one agreed with his style or not - and clearly new brand owner LVMH had a different vision for the brand - at least Zenith was being talked about. But he had also taken controversial decisions, such as ceasing supply of El Primero movements to Rolex and raising prices dramatically.

### Watches all the way

His replacement, Jean Frédéric Dufour, is a different man entirely. Dufour is Swiss and he is a watch man. "I could not sell champagne or high fashion," he says with just a hint of pride. Nor does he need to clothe his speech in corny rhetoric loaded with horological sound bites - having worked for some of the best in the industry his horological credentials are impeccable. He has worked closely with Karl Friedrich and Caroline Scheufele at Chopard, and Rolf Schnyder of Ulysse Nardin, however, it is



Opposite page and above: The stunning Zenith grande complication Christophe Colomb drew inspiration from marine chronometers and features a self-regulating gyroscope module to guarantee flat positioning of the regulating organ. The ultra-complex model seeks to address one of the key issues that faces seafarers and still haunts the contemporary watch industry to this day: how to achieve precision measurements with instruments that are subjected to constant motion. It has been produced in a limited and numbered edition of 25 pieces each in rose gold and white gold.

Jean Frédéric Dufour.





The El Primero Striking 10th chronograph heralded the grand return of Zenith to the technical values that forged the brand's success. The legendary El Primero calibre was the world's first automatic chronograph to beat at a rate of 10 vibrations per second – a development that represents a considerable advancement in the principle of jumping or flying seconds.

his time with Jean Claude Biver, when Biver was still working at the Swatch Group that left the greatest impression.

"For me, when I was at university, Biver was like a legend, *the Swiss entrepreneur*," he enthuses. What impressed the young Dufour was the directness of the Biver approach. The two men were introduced by Benoit de Gorski in Geneva and Biver gave Dufour his mobile number and told him to call, which the younger man did and then went to join Biver in Paudex. "We had a 30 second talk and then he said 'OK. Come. You can join.' You don't learn anything at university you learn instead by being in contact with entrepreneurs."

And as an entrepreneur in Swiss watches Biver is a paradigm. "He gave me a hard time, but he also said to me 'you are different from others, you feel the product in a way that not many others do. I see the way that you react in front of the product and that is what makes you different.'"

In retrospect Dufour says that it was Biver's belief that allowed him to step outside what he calls "that shell of the Swiss businessman or banker". And Biver's words were certainly more than idle flattery as Dufour found out in

the early summer of 2009. "One day I was driving on the highway when Jean Claude called. He said 'Jean-Frederic, I have something for you.' I had heard that Nataf was no longer at Zenith, so I said, 'Jean Claude may I think about it?' Silly question. 'If you take time to think about it you will not want to do it,' came the response. 'Tell me now. It is either yes or no.'"

It was of course a yes. And with this brief conversation the deal was struck, although of course Dufour had to submit to an intensive round of LVMH interviews, after which the patrician Philippe Pascal, who runs LVMH's watch and jewellery division, bumped fists with Dufour in a Burgundian handshake and ratified the appointment. What is more he even accompanied Dufour on his first day at his new job – 1 June last year.

### Back to basics

And since his arrival the culture of the company has changed. Of the past management he says: "They told me that Zenith was a beautiful and wonderful brand. But I could not make head nor tail of what they were talking about. They were doing PowerPoint presentations in English, but when I asked them why they were doing this and what the purpose of it was there was no answer."



The Zero-G to which the Christophe Colomb owes a conceptual debt.

Things soon reached the stage where he banned PowerPoint presentations and asked instead for simple information clearly laid out on a single piece of A4 paper.

Perhaps unsurprisingly all but two members of the executive committee of Zenith are now PowerPointing and spreadsheeting at locations other than the Le Locle *manufacture*. "They were not bad guys," he says, "they just spent too long with Nataf. They tried the fashion approach, but in watchmaking it is not that simple, maybe in the world of fragrance and champagne you can do it, but with watchmaking the price makes the customer perception different."

He was instead pre-occupied with the more fundamental question of the identity of Zenith. He felt that the Zenith message was unclear and when he looked into it he was amazed to find that there were around 850 SKUs. "The retailers were lost with over 800 watches and maybe only 20cm of window to display them in." He decided that ideally the brand would have no more than 150 different references and within a year he had brought the number down to 171, 111 of them existing products, the remainder new models, among them the El Primero striking 10th.

Dufour thought it strange that, for all the times that the high frequency of the El Primero was quoted and the talismanic properties with which it was credited, there was no single watch that allowed the wearer to see what this meant. So the El Primero Striking 10th is the first Zenith to make use of the 1/10th of a second accuracy of the movement with a red central hand that performs one circuit of the dial every ten seconds and which, when stopped, reads off the time to the nearest tenth of a second.

### A proud history

By the time of Baselworld 2010, Dufour's radical reform of the brand was well under way and the response from trade and press was generally favourable; as well as paring down the range he was keen to emphasise the essential qualities of classical fine watchmaking. Hence, one of his most widely praised models was the Captain, a simple round watch that did traditional timekeeping with care and forensic attention to detail. Dufour is keen to stress such traditional aspects as the polishing of the case and the cuvette beneath the winding crown - and it is this accumulation of almost imperceptible detail that builds into a compelling case to show that



Early Zenith marine chronometers that inspired the development of the Christophe Colomb.





The Captain Chronograph - one of the pieces that marks Dufour's desire to return Zenith's output to the essential qualities of classical watchmaking.

Zenith still possesses the *savoir faire* to make watches that look like watches.

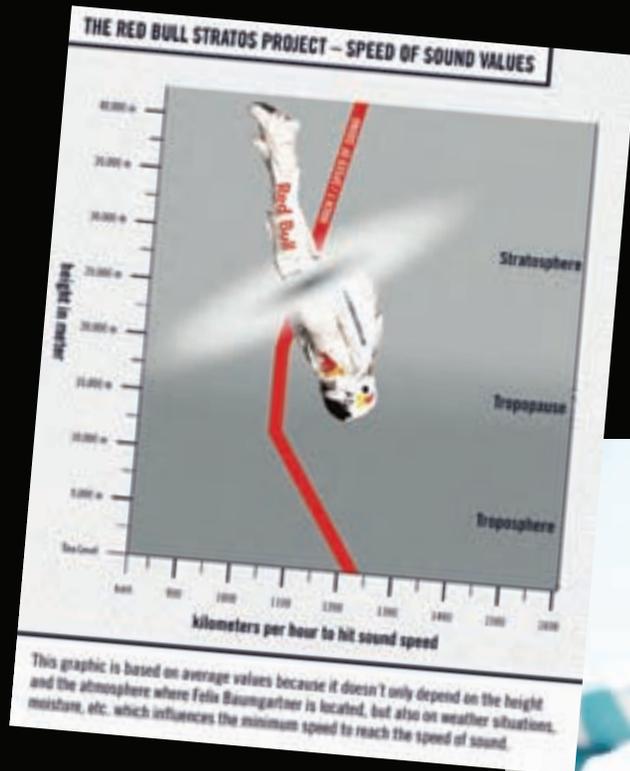
But this is not to say that Zenith is abandoning its experimental watchmaking. Indeed the theme of the pioneer - whether in terms of watchmaking or indeed the exploits of customers that Zenith has had over a period of almost 150 years (viz Amundsen, Bleriot, JFK, Gandhi etc) - is one of the themes that Dufour is developing and perhaps the most remarkable horological expression of this is the Christophe Colomb.

Although this watch owes a conceptual debt to the Zero-G, Dufour says that "the entire movement has been rebuilt around the concept of the escapement and balance wheel on gimbals". According to him the original idea of keeping

the escapement in position is the same "but all the rest has changed." Perhaps the most significant difference is that the movement is no longer automatic but hand wound, which makes the movement much thinner allowing the balance

assembly to 'come out of the watch' and become highly visible through two hemispherical crystals back and front. It is clearly a conversation piece, but it is more wearable than might be thought at first. Moreover, while the technical concept is daring the dial design is restraint itself, classic in the extreme. Cearly Dufour sees no need to gild the lily with an extravagant case and dial design. Instead he sees the Christophe Colomb as the summum of the Captain Collection, what he views as one of the two pillars of the brand, the other being the El Primero.

And in line with the Dufour credo of the pioneer the El Primero is going to be worn by Felix Baumgartner, not the pioneering independent watchmaker, but rather the pioneer Austrian skydiver. Baumgartner will leap from the edge of space, some 136,000 feet or so above the earth, and if things go well, after 30 seconds he will become the first man to break the sound barrier with his body alone. Dufour is so excited by the prospect of this unusual - one might say pioneering - sponsorship, that his pulse quickens at the mere mention of it. Who knows, with his energy and enthusiasm it is entirely likely that his heart really does beat 36,000 times per hour. ☺



With the Red Bull Stratos, Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner, accompanied by his El Primero, will undertake a stratospheric balloon flight to 120,000 feet and attempt a freefall jump targeted to reach - for the first time in history - supersonic speeds.

