



Jo Siffert, 1971.

Image courtesy of Sue Lehmann/Formula SL Images,
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Heuer Autavia Chronomatic features Heuer's earliest automatic chronograph movements, the Calibre 11. Worn by the racing driver, Jo Siffert, the version with 'Chronomatic' on the white dial is often referred to as the 'Siffert'.

Courtesy of Arno Michael Haslinger, Heuer Chronographen, Callwey 2008/www.heuerchronographs.com



The watch brand synonymous with motor racing has always been Heuer. As early as the 1930s they were creating dashboard chronograph instruments, and then in 1948 Heuer produced a drivers watch called the Auto-Graph. However it was not until the 1960's when Jack Heuer was in charge that the real "legend" watches were created.

Jonathan Scatchard and David Stone

Trackside



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Around the beginning of the 1960s the watch market was a vastly different landscape to the one we are familiar with today. Emphasis on brand identity, with the exception of a handful of established houses, was rarely considered an important issue; indeed, the majority of the Swiss market was focused solely on the rather blinkered price war for the standard automatic wristwatch.

Stops and starts

During the preceding decades Heuer had become a leading brand in the dashboard chronograph and stopwatch market (enhanced in 1964 with the takeover of their closest rivals, Leonidas), however the interest in wrist-chronograph was left wanting by the simple fact that an automatic version was yet to have been successfully developed.

It was during the 1960s that Heuer excelled as a mature, brand-focused company, but they were to also grow technologically by bridging the gap between the automatic and the chronograph. These two achievements were made possible largely thanks to Heuer's focusing on clear objectives, simply to create high quality timekeepers designed for use in motor sports.

Throughout this prolific decade Heuer expanded their portfolio with models such as the Monaco and the iconic Carrera chronographs, which are still very much in production today. Both inspired by motor racing, the latter taking its name from the notoriously dangerous car race of the 1950s, the Carrera Pan America.

Predating the Carrera by two years was another timekeeping marquee, one that would become hugely instrumental in Heuer's further integration into motor sports. The Autavia, the name a derivative of automobile and aviation, was brought to the market in 1962 as a hand wound chronograph. It was an instant success, with the first version appearing as a very cool black dialled wristwatch, dotted by three large white subdials.

Over the following six years a flurry minor variations and amendments appeared, including the introduction of a GMT watch-hand and a 24-hour rotating bezel, as well as numerous changes in dial arrangement - though ultimately staying within the original template of the trio of chronograph registers, on the highly legible dial and the sturdy, shockproof, 100 m waterproof case.

Joining forces

During this time Jack Heuer was busy working on the solutions for an automatic chronograph, a process that brought together a most unlikely band of confreres. In a joint development venture that took four years to complete, Heuer teamed up with competitors Willy Breitling, Hans Kocher von Büren, the American Watch Company and Hamilton in order to create the components for the automatic chronograph. A fellowship forged with a sense of urgency, as Zenith soon entered the race to unveil their own version of the automatic chronograph.

Launched on the 3rd March 1969, the Calibre 11 Chronomatic appeared initially in Heuer's new rectangular Monaco and in an updated version of the Autavia. One of the best descriptions came from the Heuer advertising at the time:

"This revolutionary development is marked by a rather insignificant change on the outside of the case. We moved the winding crown from the right side to the left side to remind you that the chronograph never needs winding.

"We finally made it practical by combining a 'Sunken Rotor' with a new mechanism that houses all counters on one side of the dial. The result is that the chronograph is only 1 mm thicker than our wind up models."

The first of the new range of the Autavia was the ref. 1163 T Chronomatic, a watch distinguished by its white dial with black 30-minute and 12-hour subdial and black unidirectional tachymeter. This initial batch were the only Autavias to feature the name 'Chronomatic' and having only a brief production span of a few months, they are extremely rare.



Unveiled 3rd March 1969, the Calibre 11 was one of the pioneering automatic chronograph movements.

Courtesy of Arno Michael Haslinger, Heuer Chronographen, Callwey 2008/www.heuerchronographs.com

Life on the tracks

Shortly after its release, Jack Heuer approached the Swiss racing driver and Porsche dealer, Jo Siffert, to discuss the idea of becoming an ambassador for the brand.

Born in Fribourg, Switzerland 1936, Jo Siffert was a remarkable Swiss driver who landed in the history books after winning the 1968 British Grand Prix in his Lotus 49B. This Brands Hatch victory was made so much the sweeter after the epic first-place battle against Chris Amon's Ferrari that had preceded it.



Monaco Grand Prix, 1969.



Above: Jo Siffert (1936-1971) was a Swiss racing driver who found success in both Formula 1 and in endurance racing, where he drove for the Porsche factory team.

Left: Baselworld 2003, TAG Heuer brought out a redesigned version of the Autavia.

Like a character that might have appeared in one of Horatio Alger's dime novels, Siffert came from a humble agricultural background and rose to become one of motor racing's most memorable heroes. He cut his teeth in the racing world on 350 cc motorcycles, before making the transition to four wheels, with Formula Junior. Graduating to Formula 1 in 1962 as a privateer, he struggled to make any great impact, enjoying the occasional top-10 finish, but courting misfortune more often than not.

It was during the mid-60s that Siffert branched out into endurance racing and found himself at the controls of the Porsche Carrera 6. In contrast to the difficulties he encountered in Formula 1, success was fairly instantaneous, with top-six finishes in Le Mans, Targa Floria and others. Then came the 1968 breakthrough season, which saw not only the aforementioned Formula 1 win, but also first place position in the 24-hour Daytona, the 12-hour Sebring, the Nurburgring 1000 km and the Australia 1000 km race. This unprecedented achievement earned Siffert the reputation of the world's best racing driver, with the following two years proving equally remarkable.

Man for the job

So it was that Siffert found himself at the top of his game when he came to be propositioned by Jack Heuer in 1969. Coverage of the racing driver was enormous and Heuer's sponsorship meant the brand could not help but be swept up with buzz and excitement surrounding the man. With the Heuer logo sewn into the shoulder of his overalls and splashed about the car, Siffert was also given the first series Chronomatic Autavia, the watch that would subsequently become the 'Siffert' model.

This high profile association meant Heuer became the first brand outside the motoring industry to sponsor F1, but it also had the knock-on effect of bring Heuer together with the Golf-Porsche team and then BRM and later with the sponsorship of Jacky Ickx. Some of the greatest images from the era of Hill, Clark, and Stewart have Siffert with his red and white Swiss flag racing helmet and the red and white Heuer logos on his BRM car, complete with the Autavia on his wrist.

A more important upshot of the deal, at least in terms of Heuer reaching a wider audience, came about through Siffert's friendship with Hollywood legend Steve McQueen. For the 1971 film, Le Mans, McQueen took tips from and based his character on the Swiss racing driver, to the point where he even wore the same white race suit, emblazoned with the same prominent Heuer logo upon the shoulder. And while McQueen actually opted for a Heuer Monaco during the filming, under close inspection a white dial Autavia can be spotted on the wrist of his rival Ferrari driver.

Shortly after the film, Siffert was killed in a tragic accident during the 1971 World Championship Victory Race at Brands Hatch. It resulted from a damaged suspension unit on his BRM that would later send him crashing out of the race and becoming enveloped in flames. Around 50,000 mourners attended the funeral in Switzerland and a Golf-Porsche 917 accompanied the hearse.

Today the Siffert Autavia sells for much more than the black dial of the same period, and for a version with 'Chronomatic' on the dial expect to pay a substantial premium. Marking its 40th anniversary TAG Heuer produced a new version of the Autavia, redesigned in 2002 by Jack Heuer himself.

Further information: www.tagheuer.com / www.heuerautavia.com

Steve McQueen and Jo Siffert on the set of the 1971 film Le Mans.

