

# On Track

## Ball has come a long way since America's golden age of rail

**i** Overshadowed by Swiss, German and, of late, the revived British houses, American watch companies are finally making their much-deserved comebacks. Although America's budget ranges have achieved global sales, the more costly brands enjoyed their greatest success in the home market; rare are non-US collectors of, say, Illinois or Elgin. But thanks to the world's resurgent enthusiasm for interesting wristwatches, Hamilton, Bulova and others are serious contenders once more. And now you can include the Ball Watch Company, which, its fans would attest, did more to establish precise timekeeping in the USA than any other.

Ken Kessler

Ball Watch's new Engineer Master II Diver TMT (2,006 pieces; £1,580), capable of measuring environmental temperature from -30 to 110°F (-35 to 45°C) with a 3% precision normally only achievable by a mechanical thermometer. The measurement is read from the indicator at 6 o'clock. The calibre 9018 within functions with optimal accuracy from -40 to 140°F (-40 to 60°C) thanks to a special lubricant introduced by Ball to choice movements in 2004.



On September 6th, 2006, the newest member of Ball's 'Explorers Club', Guillaume Néry dove to the incredible depth of 109 m in Villefranche sur Mer harbour to reclaim the freediving world record in constant weight (descent and ascent without assistance) for the second time. The DLC-blackened case of his Engineer Master II Diver TMT easily holds its water resistance to his typical depths, and the bezel, dial and hands' 53 micro gas tubes mean he can read the time even at 100 m, when the water's ambient light is about 1% of surface light.



Along with Canada, China, Russia and a few other massive territories, the USA spans more than one time-zone. Amazingly, American communities as recently as the 1880s operated with their own, local time-zones, but with the ferocious spread of the railway network across the USA, spurred on by the Civil War in the 1860s, the railway industry recognised a need for better organisation, agreeing among themselves in 1883 to split the country into four zones. Wisely, the public accepted this (despite it taking Congress until 1918 to sanction the concept officially).

With the arrival of the Pacific, Mountain, Central and Eastern time-zones came a need for precise timekeeping, which to this day enables brands like Mondaine and Omega to make well-regarded 'railway' watches sharing one virtue beyond accuracy and reliability: legibility. While we in the UK laugh bitterly at the notion of trains that arrive and depart to the minute (let alone second), the Swiss and others expect it. And so did the American traveller in the days before the motorcar. But it took a single, tragic event to propel Ball to the forefront of watchmaking brands.

### The Kipton Disaster

Although time-zones had been established, and watches of the late 19th century were able to meet even today's standards of chronometer testing, the rail system itself was still being fine-tuned. On April 19th 1891, a mail train was heading west on the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad in Kipton, Ohio. Twenty-five miles from Cleveland, at Elyria, the Engineer and the Conductor of *The Accommodation* were ordered to let the mail train pass them at Kipton.

After the event, the Conductor admitted that from the time his train left Elyria until it collided with the mail train at Kipton he did not look at his pocket watch. He said that he expected the Engineer to look out for 'Fast Mail No. 4', but the Engineer's watch had stopped for four minutes before running again; according to Ball historians, "a little matter of life and death of which he was unconscious."

Although there were several stations between Elyria and Kipton, the engineer proceeded, thinking that he had time to spare. Leaving Oberlin, he believed that he had a margin of seven minutes before reaching the meeting point when, in fact, he only had three minutes. It was realised that, had the conductor looked at his own watch, he could have prevented the accident.

Both trains came together at Kipton, the Fast Mail at full speed and *The Accommodation* braking as it was nearing the station.



The engineers of both trains were killed, along with nine clerks buried beneath the kindling wood and broken iron of the postal cars. It was this horrendous accident that prompted Lake Shore's officials to enlist Webb C Ball to develop an inspection system for their network.

Webster Clay Ball, born in Fredericktown, Ohio in 1847, was the first jeweller to use time signals, bringing accurate timekeeping to Cleveland when Standard Time was adopted. On July 19th 1891, three months to the day after the Kipton disaster, the General Superintendent of Lake Shore Lines appointed Ball as Chief Inspector. Eventually, his inspection system would be known as the Ball Network and it would oversee 75% of America's railroads, extending into Mexico and Canada, earning Ball a reputation as, "the man who holds a watch on 175,000 miles of railroad."

Essential to the success and the veritable core of Ball's venture was the timekeeping. He initiated a system of fortnightly checks on the watches worn by all railroad workers, the examinations undertaken by approved watchmakers, who recorded any variation on their clearance card certificates. Although the standards may seem coarse by today's measures, Ball's rules forbade variations of more than 30 seconds per week. If anything was amiss, the worker left his watch for adjustment and was furnished with a 'loaner' at no expense. Strict guidelines were also drawn-up for the factories regarding hardness, precision, reliability in five positions, power reserve and dial legibility. Spreading across almost the entire US railroad network, the watches of seven leading factories eventually complied with the 'Ball's Standard', the first being the Waltham Watch Company, later followed by Elgin Watch Company and most of the other American manufacturers.

(Top and above) The Cannonball's sunk seconds subdial at 3 o'clock echoes Ball's railroad legacy again, as some railroad men used watches with a hunter case, which disallowed the standard 6 o'clock sub-seconds. Note too the 'RR' railroad motif counterbalancing the sweep seconds hand.



(Left) The Trainmaster Cannonball chronograph (£1,285) will please purists with its enamel dial and elegant 43 mm case - a style deliberately reminiscent of the pocket watches used by the railroad workers of Webb C Ball's day.

Webb C Ball's original jewellery business in Cleveland, established in 1879, soon grew into the Ball Watch Company, perfecting other companies' movements and complete watches and reselling them. Ball used movements from the top American manufacturers, including Elgin, Waltham and Hamilton (for whom Ball was Vice President between 1894 and 1896), switching to Swiss movements as early as the 1940s for its wristwatches. Over the years, Webster Ball received many international awards for his contribution to the saving of human lives as well as his role in the history of watchmaking.

**No nonsense**

Such a functionally quantifiable connection with the railways was as important to the Ball Watch Co. as military usage is to pilot's watches. Ball's timekeeping system was the first to be accepted on a broad scale, establishing accuracy and uniformity in railway, and by extension, mainstream timekeeping. As the company puts it so succinctly, "In general, it became accepted that when the average person asks a railroad man the time, he is assured a correct answer."

What this contributed to horology - a trait visible in everything from IWC Mk 11s to Montaine Swiss Railway watches to Rolex's Explorer - is a no-nonsense approach to high legibility for work-related watches. Eschewing the filigrees and flourishes acceptable for dress watches, or any timekeepers not used in critical applications, Ball's design template addresses every detail from the shape of the hands to the font of numerals. A study of the now highly collectable vintage Ball railway pocket watches shows them to be, in many ways, as modern as anything in current production.

The superintendent and head of adjusting and finishing at Ball was one LN Cobb, a recognised expert in his particular field. He made his department a marvel of efficiency and introduced many new principles of workshop management. For example, it was customary at the time to furnish each worker with tools valued at perhaps \$10 to \$20. Those under Cobb's supervision, however, each had a complete set of tools valued from \$500 to \$3,500!

Ball's original slogan was "Accuracy Under Adverse Conditions", recently evolved to

"Accuracy is Everything", and this has been applied to the five 'families' that make up the current catalogue. The firm was family owned by direct descendants of Webster, until the 1990s when the right to use the name was sold. Since the arrival of new management in 1999, relocating the brand from New York to Neuchâtel, Ball has extended its reach beyond railways, not least because computers now control railways at every level with some countries foolishly eliminating all but a skeleton crew of staff on their trains.

Ball's ambassadors now go beyond railway personnel to include - as founder members of the new Ball Explorers Club - genuine explorers Jim Whittaker, the first American mountaineer to conquer Mount Everest, and oceanographer and scientific explorer Richard Limeburner. In 2005, Ball added to its roster NASA astronaut Owen Garriott, who spent 60 days on the Skylab III mission in 1973, and American speed skiing champion, John "Mad Cow" Hembel. The newest member of the group is Guillaume Néry, three-times freediving world record holder.

**The five families**

Now all Swiss-made, Ball watches fall into five families, with names selected to honour old railroad heroes. Common throughout are shock resistance to 7,500 g, immunity to variations in temperature from -40°C to 60°C, water resistance up to 300 m and safety from magnetic fields up to 12,000 A/m (the norm is 4,800 A/m). Uniquely, every modern Ball watch is even equipped with patented 'micro gas tubes' for exceptional night-time legibility. Requiring neither batter power nor an outside light source for charging, they will glow continuously for up to 25 years, according to the company, highlighting numerals, indices and dials with a luminosity 100 times brighter than that of other luminescent solutions.

The first of Ball's series pays respect to the Engineer - locomotive mechanic of the past, responsible for the train's dependable running. Models in this line include a selection of wholly functional, 'no-nonsense' pieces including the Telemeter 'storm-chaser' watch, the Engineer Master II GMT for the busy traveller, and the Engineer Master II Diver, with legibility "that will light the way beneath the seas".

For the Engineer Hydrocarbon Series, Ball wanted to provide the utmost in indestructibility. This collection is favoured by the company's extreme adventurer ambassadors, including models such as the Alligator, which Richard Limeburner tested during his search for the eponymous US Navy submarine, and the Engineer Hydrocarbon Titanium, a tribute to the materials employed by Hembel during his pursuit of the title Fastest American on Skis.

Trainmasters were the railways' heavy equipment specialists, responsible for the train security and its crew. The models in this

collection refer to the first watches signed as 'Ball's Standard'. Their precision and reliability ensured the trains' security. A highlight of this range is the Trainmaster Cannonball, a purist-pleasing chronograph with black or white enamel dial, date window at the 12 o'clock position and an oversized crown; case size is 43 mm.

Named after the individual who was equal to a ship's Captain, the Conductor series honours the man who distributed and controlled passengers' tickets, and who whistled train departures at precise times. In this line are rectangular models recalling the first bracelet watch of similar form created by Ball Watch in 1920. A ladies' variation of this collection was introduced in 2005 and expanded with this year's Conductor Transcendent Pearl, featuring mother-of-pearl dials.

Lastly, the Fireman Series provides robust and simple designs to celebrate the hardest workers on the trains of yesteryear. The new Fireman Night Train, appropriately finished in a coal-black case treated with scratch-resistant diamond-like carbon (DLC) coating, is a 43 mm three-handed timekeeper with red sweep-seconds hand, 24-hour UTC indicator in its own arc-shaped window and 63 micro-gas tubes for absolute legibility in darkened conditions.

Ball's juggling act is remarkable: the company has managed to retain the virtues that established the brand in the late 1800s, while incorporating modern touches - especially the micro gas tube illumination - that don't jar, nor spoil the effect. Best of all, the current Ball watches demonstrate a peculiarly American wristwatch virtue: the prices are almost shockingly low. ○



(Left) An early Official Railroad Standard pocket watch from the Ball Watch Company, designed and regulated according to the strict guidelines drawn-up by Webb C Ball upon his appointment as Chief Inspector of the Lake Shore Lines.

(Right) Trainmaster Cleveland Express (E945) is a classical chronometer driven by a COSC-certified ETA 2836-2 movement. Its name derives from the high-speed route that ran during the first half of the 20th century between New York and Ball's headquarters in the bustling Midwest.

**Further information:** Tel: +41 32 724 53 00, www.ballwatch.ch  
Available from David Morris at Selfridges in London (020 7318 3531) and Manchester (0161 838 0660)

