



Sixth Gear



When *QP* was asked to come and look at TAG Heuer's latest watches at the McLaren Technology Centre it was easy to say yes. Apart from the centre being a RIBA Award winner in 2005, the day promised a try-out in the Mercedes SLR McLaren supercar. As it turned out, TAG Heuer's decision to show its watches here was inspired, revealing unsuspected depths to the companies' relationship. At a time when TAG is taking a breather between horological bombshells and returning its focus to the more bread-and-butter matter of transforming prototypes into production models (the Monaco 69 has finally made this transition), the decision to reinforce the company's historical link to motorsport was well judged.

James Gurney

Arriving at the McLaren Technology Centre is a dramatic experience. Norman Foster apparently wanted visitors to be reminded of the "country house experience" where the drive is designed to present the house in its complete setting. While formally true, the experience is less country house and more James Bond. Instead of the glimpses and gradual revelation of the manor through screens of trees, the visitor at McLaren sweeps past a few manicured grassy mounds (disturbingly reminiscent of the Teletubbies) to be presented with a steel and glass façade, stunningly reflected in a lake that appears to lap against the glass walls. The building and lake are roughly kidney-shaped in plan, resembling a sort of loose yin-yang.

Inside is a projection of corporate structure so vivid that the following PowerPoint presentation of the group's structure was almost irrelevant. Each division has its own

reception and space within the building, all accessible from the main atrium. It is here that the first evidence of TAG Heuer's deep involvement with McLaren was revealed; a breathtaking display of McLaren race cars stretching back to Bruce McLaren's 1950s Austin Ulster and including most of the TAG-engined cars. Since then, TAG Heuer has been a partner-sponsor in one shape or other up to the present day, which sees TAG as timekeeper for the team.

Sterility rules

The shared history of the two companies begins in the mid-1980s, when Heuer watches became part of the Techniques d'Avant Grade investment group - already closely involved with the McLaren team. Indeed, the ties were close enough that CEO Ron Dennis actually served as a director of the newly formed TAG Heuer in 1985.

(Above left) The showstopping Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren - named and styled after the gran turismo Sport Light Racing cars of the 1950s - made its UK debut in the summer of 2004. Its Mercedes-AMG 5.5 litre V8 supercharged engine gives 626 bhp and a top speed of 207 mph.

(Above right) TAG Heuer's second SLR Chronograph (£2,495) inspired by the Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren supercar and limited to 3,500 pieces. The pushbuttons are designed to mimic the gear paddles in the car and the dial features high-end finishings: ten double-index diamond facets applied by hand one-by-one; two rhodium-plated rings at 3 and 9 o'clock; and the hands have been diamond-tipped by hand.



Ron Dennis's obsessional approach reaches its zenith - and distinctly Blofeld-esque feel - with the staff Hugo Boss uniforms, made without buttons, zips or buckles to avoid the possibility of a scratch.

(Above left) The atrium at the Technology Centre, with a display of historical McLaren cars stretching back to New Zealander founder Bruce McLaren's cars of the 1950s. The glass façade overlooks an artificial lake.

(Above right) Precision production line. Just like a Formula One racing car, the bodywork of the new Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren is made of a carbon fibre monocoque.

(Opposite page, left) The walk-in autoclave at the Technology Centre, which is used to cure large sections of carbon-fibre bodywork.

(Opposite page, right) A sterile F1 Race bay at the Technology Centre. The engineers' Hugo Boss uniforms are designed to be scratchproof, and food is forbidden anywhere near the shop floor.

Clearly, the flow of ideas was a two-way street, as not only did TAG Heuer begin a journey of exceptional growth and creativity, both in terms of brand and watches, but it is hard not to imagine a chord being struck with Ron Dennis when he first visited TAG Heuer's precision *manufacture* in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Dennis was legendary for his absolute abhorrence of the traditional grease-smear mechanic image, and the Technology Centre (opened in 2004) is this approach writ large. The pristine workstations at Woking would, in truth, shame most watch-houses, to the point where Dennis was reluctantly persuaded that engineers should at least be allowed to bring water anywhere near (food, of course, remaining an absolute no-no).

This obsessional approach reaches its zenith - and distinctly Blofeld-esque feel - with the Hugo Boss uniforms that engineering staff wear: the clothes are made without buttons, zips or buckles to avoid even the possibility of a scratch. Check your jewellery at the door and don a disposable cover for your watch upon entry! We could only assume that the white cat had been banished for shedding hairs on the sterile surfaces.

Synergy

Just as some of the Swiss journalists were getting a little edgy, a comfortingly familiar presence was found: a Charmelle spark-erosion machine, exactly as found at almost every watchmaker. But there the resemblance weakens as, while the process of making F1 cars is uncannily similar to that of making watches, no watch-house I know has a walk-in autoclave for curing carbon-fibre shells. Also, as far as I know, none of the new watch factories have managed to sign-up all their suppliers with partnership deals in the near-obsessive manner of the Technology Centre. Even the grouting supplier is an official partner (Mapei, since you ask).

So what comes from such an intimate relationship? Certainly, McLaren has just about the slickest marketing team in Formula 1 and is the only team that seems to have a brand identity beyond the race team; due to, at least in part, the other activities McLaren is involved with, but also from its close contact with TAG Heuer. In terms of technical co-operation it is hardly surprising to learn that contact is limited, given such differing engineering concerns (though TAG is apparently tapping into

(Right) The new TAG Heuer Carrera Racing (£1,550), reinforcing TAG's link to motorsport. Since its creation by Jack Heuer in 1964, the Carrera chronograph has been one of TAG Heuer's most iconic models. It derives its name from the Carrera Panamericana Mexico - a famously difficult car race of the 1950s.

McLaren's expertise in materials). But there is of course TAG Heuer's valuable expertise in electronic timekeeping, upon which McLaren places great reliance.

It is in design terms that the relationship is most fruitful however, as a focus for TAG's Formula 1 watch collection and, more specifically, the Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren. The latter has directly inspired two chronographs that share design cues from the SLR, even down to push-buttons that emulate the semi-automatic gear paddles from the car. At this point I should admit that trying out the car in question on Top Gear's test track might have clouded my judgement, but even without that 600 bhp shot of enthusiasm it's hard not to be impressed by the clever engineering and design. Though I cannot help feeling that buying the watch without having secured the car beforehand is to set oneself up for certain disappointment.

The two SLR watches apart, it is hard to see direct tangible results from the relationship in the TAG Heuer collection. But in terms of association, the link with McLaren adds an undeniable glamour. While there are people out there who might be immune to the concept or at least sceptical, the relationship has a credibility and grounding in real co-operation that is almost unmatched. ○

Further information: TAG Heuer, Tel: 0800 037 9658, www.tagheuer.com, www.mclaren.com

