

The 18th Man

Girard-Perregaux gets on board BMW Oracle Racing

Nicholas Foulkes



A couple of years ago it was cars. Now it is yachts. Watch brands just can't stay out of the water these days. Hublot is supporting regattas galore and is very close to chic boat brand Wally; Panerai recently held a relaxed launch for its new calibre in Sardinia to coincide with a vintage yacht race (so low-key that not a single watch was shown); Audemars Piguet is back on the waves with America's Cup defenders Alinghi; Breitling too is taking to the high seas with its Medcup series. But the most intriguing brand to berth in the *haute horlogerie* marina is Girard-Perregaux. Intriguing for two reasons: firstly, burning rubber and tarmac usually spring to mind whenever G-P is mentioned - certainly not flapping sails and spume; secondly, Gino Macaluso is probably the most thoughtful watch-brand owner-operator and anything he does usually carries an intellectual and cultural payload worth discovering. *GP* joins Macaluso in Trapani, on board G-P's latest branding partner, America's Cup contender *BMW Oracle Racing*.

Featuring Valencia instead of Paris and the Golden Gate Yacht Club burgee instead of Los Angeles, this 'USA 76' special edition of Girard-Perregaux's *ww.tc* has been launched to commemorate the watchmaker's new partnership with America's Cup challenger BMW Oracle Racing (Sfr.13,500). The model is in steel on leather or rubber strap.



(Right) Front view of the ww.tc USA 76 world-time chronograph, driven by the 4 Hz GP033C0 movement. A time-only version of this time-zone watch exists too, with G-P's legendary Tourbillon with Three Gold Bridges.

It is surprising to find Luigi 'Gino' Macaluso so enraptured by the world of sailing. After all, he was a noted rally champ of the 1970s and for many years has led the CSAI (Commissione Sportiva Automobilistica Italiana) - the body governing Italian motor sport. He has close links to the industrial aristocracy of Turin, including friendships with the di Montezemolo and Agnelli families, and has Rudolfo Mailander - Agnelli's right hand during the '60s, '70s and '80s - as a father-in-law. He is a keen and intelligent car collector with a deep and informed knowledge of the vehicles in his possession. And it is widely acknowledged that when he launched his 'Girard-Perregaux pour Ferrari' series a little over 10 years ago, Macaluso created the now-rampant style of co-branding deal that links upscale cars with fine watches.

Of course, part of the reason for the brand's shift from cars to boats is because the arrangement between Girard-Perregaux and Ferrari came to an end last year; a pity in my opinion, because as well as being the first of the new generation of 'car watches', they were proper timepieces in their own right, which just happened to be linked to a well-known carmaker. You did not have to be a Ferrari fan to appreciate them - they were interesting and desirable for their horological ingenuity. However, Macaluso's is not the way of easy commercialism, and as the Ferrari brand steps from being a carmaker to a retail brand selling everything from toys to T-shirts, appending its prancing-horse logo to everything from cameras to computers, it seemed inevitable that the watchmaker from La Chaux-de-Fonds would part company with the car brand.



Man of the sea

Nevertheless, I was a little sceptical of the subsequent involvement in yachting. Sure, Macaluso is the closest thing that the watch industry has to a Renaissance man (his interests run from obscure rally cars to contemporary art), but I had never heard him talk of his love of the sea. However, it transpires that he had an involvement with the sport at the highest level over 20 years ago. "The America's Cup is something that has been in my mind since I worked on the marketing for the Italian team, and the boat *Azzurra* during the early 1980s. It was the first time that the New York Yacht Club had accepted an Italian boat, it was backed by Gianni Agnelli and the Aga Khan. It was a very special period; Italy was not in good shape," says Macaluso, with easy understatement, of a time when Italy was ravaged by terrorist attacks, riddled with corruption and changing its governments on an almost seasonal basis. "But suddenly we won the World Cup and then in 1983 *Azzurra* made the semi-final of the America's Cup. For Italy, at that time, it was a myth - the success we had was almost unbelievable. Luca [di Montezemolo - now the high-living Fiat and Ferrari boss] was engaged in that operation and together we did a very interesting job," he recalls, a smile playing over his features as he remembers happy days in Newport Rhode Island. "I met fantastic characters, fantastic people - it was very important for my education."

He recalls this early America's Cup whilst sat in the BMW Oracle lounge, by the harbour of Sicilian port, Trapani for one of the preliminary regattas of yachting's most famous competition. Girard-Perregaux has partnered-up with enigmatic super-mogul Larry Ellison - CEO of the Oracle software firm, and a man with an almost Nietzschean desire to dominate the high seas. As well as his BMW Oracle America's Cup challenge, Ellison has a yacht that is more of a personal ocean liner, which at the time of writing is the biggest in the world.

Shared interests

It has been a miserable day so far in Trapani. An unprepossessing town at the best of times, pelting rain that descends like a curtain and clouds that seem only a couple of hundred feet off the ground do little to improve the mood of this depressing seaside town. In the morning, the Girard-Perregaux hospitality yacht, loaded up with champagne, Italian journalists and Italian



(Above) G-P's 'USA 71' Sea Hawk II, limited to 500 units. Girard-Perregaux has used the name 'Sea Hawk' to designate its marine products since the early 1940s, but the first real divers' watches with rotatable bezel only debuted in the mid-1960s.

retailers all jabbering excitedly, sets out to watch the racing - Acts 8 and 9 in the build-up to 2007's America's Cup final. After about 90 minutes, rain descends in such quantities that it becomes impossible to see anything - one cannot tell where sea ends and sky begins.

Now we are back on shore and Macaluso is scrutinising the weather forecast for the following day. It looks much the same, perhaps a little worse. This is the day that Macaluso will be the

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18th man on the BMW Oracle boat. The '18th man' is a ceremonial role and something of an honour. Effectively a passenger aboard the competition boat, this is one of those money-can't-buy experiences - though given the abysmal weather today and the pessimistic forecast, I for one would not be buying today, even if it were for sale.

Surprisingly, Macaluso is looking forward to his stint as human ballast, and is delighted that he has found a way of being involved with the sport. "It was impossible to be a part of the overall organisation, as Louis Vuitton do that. I don't know if you can call Louis Vuitton a watchmaker, but they produce watches with great success. It was impossible to share the emotion with Alinghi [2005 champions and current joint-highest ranker with BMW Oracle] - they have Audemars Piguet, a friend but also a competitor of ours. Then I was introduced to Larry Ellison and we talked about watches. He is a collector of Girard-Perregaux and he invited Monica [Macaluso's wife] and myself to Valencia in 2004.

"My feeling was very positive and I realised that the project could be interesting." But as ever, Macaluso is endearingly understated. When speaking of his involvement, he is at pains to explain that he is a small partner. "Moreover, you must remember that companies like Rolex, TAG Heuer, and Omega have been involved in sailing for a very long time. Breitling is more recent and we are complete newcomers."

Human endeavour

What is interesting about the America's Cup, even for neophytes, is the highly technical nature of the competition - a section of a carbon-fibre boom on display in the BMW Oracle tent is eloquently expressive of this and coming at the sport from an horological viewpoint it is difficult to look at it and not think of the carbon-fibre dials that Macaluso first put on wristwatches 10 years ago. "I found a lot of similarities in the technology and



The principal players: (left to right) *BMW Oracle Racing* skipper Chris Dickson, G-P CEO Gino Macaluso, and Oracle CEO Larry Ellison.



(Above) The jewel in G-P's America's Cup crown, the Sea Hawk II Pro 'Challenger of Record' tourbillon. Its GP V97 flying tourbillon movement is encased in titanium, and water-resistant to 3,000m. Limited and numbered edition of 32 pieces.

innovation," says Macaluso, who is always excited by the intellectual dimensions of what he gets involved in, quickly digressing into hydrodynamic theory.

But it is the fact that human involvement remains crucial that really excites him. Like many aficionados, he feels that motor sport has become too reliant on technology. He divides drivers into pre- and post-Senna categories and believes that today drivers cannot be compared to those of a previous generation. By contrast, he feels that the America's Cup is a "technological ballet" in which men are as much, if not more of a part of the machines they operate.

"There is no stored energy on these boats; everything is done by men in real time, and that adds to the excitement. I don't think you can compare the America's Cup to F1. The F1 drivers of today are greatly assisted by electronics. The value of the driver is less important than the human involvement in the America's Cup. In the America's Cup the human being is like an orchestra conductor."

Variants of a theme

But much as it has grown into a personal passion for Macaluso, there is of course a business side to the arrangement. Over the next three years Macaluso will be releasing America's Cup-related watches and initial signs are that they will be some of the most intriguing watches of the early 21st century. For a start, the core watch is a version of the Sea Hawk II that has been designated the 'Team' watch. The Sea Hawk II can be recognised by its screw-down crown at 4 o'clock, with characteristic crown guards flowing out from the case and lug.



Special edition casebacks. (Left to right) ww.tc USA 76, Sea Hawk II USA 71, Sea Hawk II USA 71 Team Watch (individually numbered for each crew member), and the Sea Hawk II Pro.

For the Golden Gate Yacht Club of San Francisco - home port of the BMW Oracle challenge - Macaluso has created a special version of the iconic ww.tc timepiece, with Valencia taking the place of Paris on the city ring and the burgee of the Golden Gate Yacht Club signifying the west-coastal time-zone of America. However, the *piece de resistance* is the Seahawk II Pro 'Challenger of Record' tourbillon - a work of genius that is true fusion watchmaking, placing an *haute complication* into a performance sports watch. The practical applications of a titanium-cased tourbillon capable of being submerged to a 3,000-metre depth are limited, but the Pro has already proved an immense success, with all 32 sold out. Macaluso is now pondering other ways of developing extreme high-performance *haute horlogerie* pieces.

But as we leave Trapani on that miserable afternoon, his more immediate concern is how to survive his stint as 18th man the next day. At the end of the following day I call him, expecting to hear his voice thick with a cold caught from fighting the elements on the high seas. Instead his voice is buoyant; elated even! The weather confounded the forecasters and was as perfect as the result. "We won!" he says, adding jokingly, "And now they want me to be 18th man every time to bring them luck!" Who did he beat? "We won against Alinghi," he says, jubilantly. "Girard-Perregaux beat Audemars Piguet!" As he said earlier, a friend but most importantly a competitor. And one that he got the better of today. ◉

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