

Bouncing Back

QP talks to Giles Rees, who returned this summer to The Swatch Group as the UK's Managing Director

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Blancpain has become, since the company's sudden renaissance in the 1980s, one of the more prestigious names in the watch world - despite the almost comically misleading "Depuis 1735..." tag line. Excellent levels of quality and finish played a major role in the rehabilitation of one of Switzerland's oldest watch houses, but all this effort might have gone largely unnoticed if it were not for the larger-than-life ebullience of Jean-Claude Biver. It was the buzz around Biver, backed by a heavyweight marketing effort that caused the world at large to pay attention to Blancpain's undoubted qualities.

As MD of the UK subsidiary of The Swatch Group, Giles Rees is facing a similar challenge, as he candidly revealed when I caught up with him at the opening of Blancpain's new *haute horlogerie* atelier in Le Brassus in October. In between inspections of the new workbenches from which a steady stream of fine watches is expected to emerge, and admiring the prodigious display of Blancpain milestones on display (world's thinnest chronograph...), Rees made clear his intention to introduce, as far as the UK is concerned, some of the 'bounce' that Blancpain enjoyed in the Biver days. Together with Breguet and Glashütte (The Swatch Group's other 'prestige' marques) you can expect to see much more of Blancpain over the next year or so.



(Left) Blancpain marked the reopening of its refurbished atelier and its 'Tradition of Innovation' exhibit by establishing another world record - the introduction of the calibre 5621 for the new ladies' perpetual calendar (£17,430), which at a miniscule 2.91 mm thickness is the thinnest perpetual calendar in the world.

(Opposite page) Forty-four-year-old Giles Rees, now heading The Swatch Group UK after 5 years at Nokia, running global sales for luxury mobile phone brand, Vertu. Before that, he was Licensing Director of Jaguar Cars, which followed his first stint at Swatch UK.



One of the first steps will be to build The Swatch Group's presence in central London, which will then be the base from which a far more outgoing brand ethos can operate - Rees being happy to concede that Richemont and LVMH are currently far more visible through their brands than The Swatch Group and are consequently reaping the rewards. Rees was, however, careful to emphasise that it would not be a question of aping the competition. "It is unlikely that there will be a Breguet Polo or Blancpain Golf next summer," he observed wryly. With an immediate background that includes a five-year stint developing the Vertu luxury mobile phone brand for Nokia, Giles Rees is unlikely to be lost for ideas as to how he should connect with the audience desired.

Since Los Angeles in 1932, Omega has been Official Timekeeper for a total of 21 Olympic Games over the 20th century. The Torino 2006 Olympic Winter Games will mark the return of Omega to its historic role, and the watchmaker is naturally launching a concomitant 'Olympic Collection' - all with the famous Olympic rings symbol counter as counterweight to the central seconds hand.

(Above left) From the Torino 2006 collection (a series of three limited edition chronographs), one of 26 Speedmaster Broad Arrow Co-Axial Rattrapante models, with self-winding calibre 3612 fitted with Omega's proprietary Co-Axial Escapement and the Omega free sprung-balance.

(Above right) Glashütte - one of the three 'Prestige' brands at Swatch, alongside Breguet and Blancpain - launched the Star Collection at Basel this year to much surprise and delight. Its 'PinkPassion' model is fitted with the German manufacture's PanoMaticDate automatic calibre 90-01 (€15,500).

(Left) The ultra-thin calibre 5621, from Blancpain's ladies' perpetual calendar.

Up to speed

Breguet, Blancpain and Glashütte form but part of the challenge Rees has taken up; the most pressing and difficult being the restructuring of Omega's distribution in the UK. With very little appearing to have changed in the distribution model since his previous tenure as Omega Brand Director between '95 and '99, Rees has had to face up to the task of bringing the UK into line with the brand that Omega has become in the meantime. From the James Bond association, to the introduction of premium movements such as the Co-Axial Escapement, Omega has transformed once again into a credible challenger to Rolex - with prices and positioning to match. A complex and at times painful task, this is the main priority for the moment.

"Dealing with the multiples [Goldsmiths etc.] has been relatively straightforward, as the group's portfolio of brands compensates for gaps left by Omega's departure from some outlets. But for independents, it's a much more difficult prospect," he reveals. "Some have been Omega stockists for decades and have built businesses around having Omega as the top brand. But, wherever possible, we are trying to be creative in finding a solution."

With a rapidly growing market (despite the recent downturn in consumer spending) Rees seems excited by the possibilities that the group's unmatched portfolio offers, as well as the diversity of challenges. As he says, "While Swatch customers should expect no lesser service than if they were Breguet customers, Breguet owners will clearly demand a special level of service." ○



(Above) The Olympic Timeless Collection features six chronographs, all with the Omega logo from 1932. Most striking is this rubber-strapped Seamaster Chrono.

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