

# Pole to Pole

Kobold's speedy success owes a lot to its charismatic President

Claire Adler



Polar Surveyor Chronograph, developed with Sir Ranulph Fiennes (\$5,850). Day or night of the local time zone is indicated - essential for the North and South Poles, where either perpetual darkness or daylight reign.



Michael Kobold, who, at 26, is one of the youngest Presidents in the luxury goods industry.

From \$4,650, the SMG-1, originally commissioned by the United States Special Forces. A ceramic version will be released for explosives experts in 2006/7.

At only 26, Michael Kobold has some of the world's biggest names wearing his watches. His first advertisement - a snapshot of *Sopranos* actor James Gandolfini giving the finger - elicited numerous complaints when it appeared in *The Economist*. It was swiftly followed by an arguably more reverent Sir Ranulph Fiennes giving Kobold watches his own one-and-a-half thumbs up. Bill Clinton is a fan and even the US military has commissioned Kobold watches for its special forces. *QP* gets to the bottom of the heavy-duty brand's rapid rise to fame.

Michael Kobold claims to make watches for modern-day explorers in challenging environments. In this way, he prides himself on his similarity to his own clientele. Kobold has certainly achieved a phenomenal amount in a short span of time - even if he did make his debut in the Swiss watch industry at Chronoswiss a decade ago, aged 16. Competing against many established high-end, heavy-duty watch marques, he has successfully built an international brand in little more than five years. Kobold claims his was the first company in the world to sell watches direct from the factory via the internet. His watches are already worn by polar explorers, underwater cinematographers, NASA test pilots, CIA operatives, deep-sea divers and field scientists.

In contrast to certain other leading watch and car brands that customise existing products with specialised components for individuals on particular expeditions, he is careful to point out that the Kobold watches on the wrists of Arctic divers are exactly the same as those available to his "regular" customers. "This season alone, three of our watches are on Mount Everest, so the ratio of our watches actually out in the field is relatively high," he says. Despite this however, Kobold has committed himself to creating no more than 2,500 watches per year.

### Messing with the family

While forging a success in the watch industry may require boldness and no mean dose of tenacity, Kobold has tempered these qualities by bringing a



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certain naiveté to the task. Wittingly or not, his youth and charm have been an enormous bonus along the way. "I don't have a television," says Kobold, who grew up in Frankfurt, attending the Frankfurt International School, "and I repeatedly make the mistake of not knowing how famous people are. So when a man with a deep voice called James Gandolfini phoned me to order a Kobold watch, I thought he was a cop and instinctively offered him a police discount. He told me he wasn't a cop, he was an actor. I asked if he'd done anything big. 'No, not really,' he said, adding he was in a show called *The Sopranos*. 'Oh, a musical,' I presumed.

"It was then that he invited me to New York to visit the set of the multiple award-winning show, telling me to ask for 'the big fat guy.'" The two have since

become firm buddies. So much so that a year ago Kobold gave Gandolfini 10% ownership of the company as a good-will gesture.

When Kobold decided to advertise, he called up his pal and asked him to endorse his brand. "I didn't really have a budget so I took the photos on my camera," he recalls. "Jim was smiling and I asked him why he was being so nice to me when he's usually such a moody bastard. So he gave me the finger and I snapped him. As it turned out, all the pictures from the shoot came out dark apart from that one. So that was the one we went with." The provocative full-page ad led to all kinds of complaints at *The Economist* and various watch magazines, "causing quite a stir on watch chat-rooms on the internet too," he adds proudly.

The controversial advertisements run by Kobold, featuring the brand's two most loyal ambassadors.





A prototype watch strap was tested for durability by Michael's pet rottweiler, Lucky. After a 24-hour session, the dog was unable to destroy the nylon material.



Michael Kobold does not pay anyone to wear his watches. The two first met when Kobold was responsible for collecting Sir Ranulph from the airport when he came as guest speaker to his high-school graduation. "Ran's flight arrived really late and it was pouring with rain. I was driving at around 140 kmh to get us to the ceremony on time - I didn't really know how famous he was and I don't think he had ever been so scared in his whole life," quips Kobold.

Fiennes and Kobold worked for two years on the Polar Surveyor Chronograph, which came out in 2002 and is still a brand bestseller. Fashioned from steel or aerospace-grade titanium and featuring an extra-thick domed crystal and screw-down crown, the watch is water resistant to 1,000 feet. Kobold explains that while Breitling, Rolex and IWC have pin bars between the lugs to keep the straps on, this watch has stainless steel screwback bars on the lugs so the strap can never come off. Each Kobold watch spends 1,000 hours in the factory and is examined by Kobold personally. Customers can also rest assured that a prototype watch strap was tested for durability by Kobold's pet rottweiler, Lucky. After a 24-hour session, the dog was unable to destroy the nylon material.

### Precocious start

Kobold's fascination for mechanical watches began with the gift of a watch aged 12. He soon started amassing mechanical watches and admits that today one of his favourite brands is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Panerai. Aged 16, he wrote to all the Swiss watch companies offering his services for the summer. "Most didn't respond," he says, "and Breitling, Omega and Rolex wrote back to say

### One and a half thumbs up

The current advertisement featuring Sir Ranulph Fiennes was entirely produced the day before Sir Ranulph departed for Mount Everest, accompanied by his Kobold Polar Surveyor Chronograph. It also managed to attract complaints - this time from organisations representing the physically handicapped. Sir Ranulph, described by the Guinness Book of Records as "the world's greatest living explorer" lost several fingers and a thumb to frostbite in 2000 during his abandoned fourth attempt to reach the North Pole without re-supply. In the ad, he gives a hearty one-and-a-half thumbs-up to Kobold.

Formerly sponsored by Rolex, Fiennes was recently appointed Kobold's first ambassador, although

(Top) Kobold claims its Polar Surveyor Titanium (\$6,250) is the world's first wristwatch to combine local time, a GMT/UTC-based second time zone, AM/PM and date indicators for local time, as well as a chronograph. Its movement is a specially developed calibre, the K.751 - Kobold's first reworked version of the legendary ETA/Valjoux 7750.

(Above) Phantom Chronograph (\$4,550) on a Soarway bracelet treated with PVD - physical vapour deposition. This process coats the steel or titanium watch in three layers of black, non-reflective, scratch-resistant ceramic film, just a few microns thick.



they weren't interested." But the young Michael Kobold struck gold when Chronoswiss wrote back inviting him for interview. When Kobold arrived, Chronoswiss Founder Gerd-Rüdiger Lang was utterly taken aback to be faced with a pubescent 16-year-old boy. Today, Kobold refers to Herr Lang as his mentor, "Not to be confused with Walter Lange of A Lange & Söhne, who was one of Lang's two mentors, alongside Jack Heuer," he adds.

During his first year as an economics student at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, Michael started selling re-labelled watches under his own brand name, from his dorm room. "Pittsburgh is a dull, boring town; there's nothing to do here but work," he explains. "Re-labelling existing watches, including those from Sinn Spezialuhren [German firm out of which Bell & Ross was born; a similarly utilitarian brand to Kobold], which weren't already being distributed in the USA, was a way to start my own company on a limited budget. I initially put in around £2,500. Unintentionally, I created a following." At 22, Kobold designed and assembled his first watch, the Soarway. Designed as the most rugged of Kobold watches, the Soarway is geared towards professional divers.

More recently, when three senior members of the US military flew in for three days to commission

Kobold watches, they had been so busy making fun of this fresh-faced youngster's driving, that they crashed their own vehicle straight into a wall on their way to dinner. However their meetings soon resulted in the SMG-1. With a 46-mm case, its ETA 2836 movement is protected by a soft iron core - an antimagnetic case within a case.

Kobold has now set his sights on England, where he is expanding distribution and considering moving to. "Britain has such a rich heritage of fine watchmaking," he says. Simultaneously, he is keenly aware of the publicity offered by high-profile celebrities who wear his watches (already listed on the website are Kiefer Sutherland, Leo DiCaprio and Bruce Springsteen, amongst many others).

He has even started the 'Celebrity Watches for Charity' programme, asking celebrity customers to auction-off their watches after a year of ownership, guaranteeing a new replacement. His chosen charity is the Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Of course that means he will now have to redirect his characteristic charm towards Hollywood. Compared to the extreme conditions his watches are built for, even this urban jungle seems tough. However, something tells me that the tenacious Mr Kobold is up to the challenge... ◯

The most recognisable of Kobold's range is the SEAL model ('Tactical' variant pictured). Designed in conjunction with deep-sea professional divers, the SEAL is water resistant to 1,000 metres (3,300 feet) and features a helium escape valve and inner, soft-iron antimagnetic case.

Further information: [www.koboldwatch.com](http://www.koboldwatch.com)