

Breaking the

Ice

De Grisogono's new F1 watch debuts at a launch party dripping in diamonds

Nicholas Foulkes

ⓘ I do not shirk my responsibilities as special correspondent of *QP* - I go fearlessly where others dare not tread; no stone is left unturned in my gallant pursuit of the hottest stories in *haute horlogerie*. Thus it was in best Woodward and Bernstein, Pulitzer-winning mode that I landed at Nice airport. With barely a moment to stop for a small Havana cigar, I dashed to the heliport. Within minutes, I was heading towards the small Mediterranean Principality of Monaco, where de Grisogono figurehead Fawaz Gruosi and Renault F1's Team Manager Flavio Briatore were launching the fruits of a unique collaboration - the 'Power Breaker' chronograph. Proceedings were predictably glamorous, but your correspondent was up to the challenge...

'S03' variant of de Grisogono's new Power Breaker in white gold, bezel and crown protection set with 180 white diamonds with black rubber strap (€21,150) with de Grisogono white gold folding clasp. Note the 'F1' logo on the strap - a salute to the sport in which Gruosi's collaborator, Flavio Briatore has become a hugely dominant player.



(Left) Fawaz Gruosi talks Flavio Briatore through their new toy. Before watches and F1, Briatore started his career at the Milan Stock Exchange in 1974, where he met Luciano Benetton. Three years later, he had established Benetton USA. He joined the Benetton F1 team in 1989, becoming Managing Director in 1994. He has been with Renault F1 since 2002.

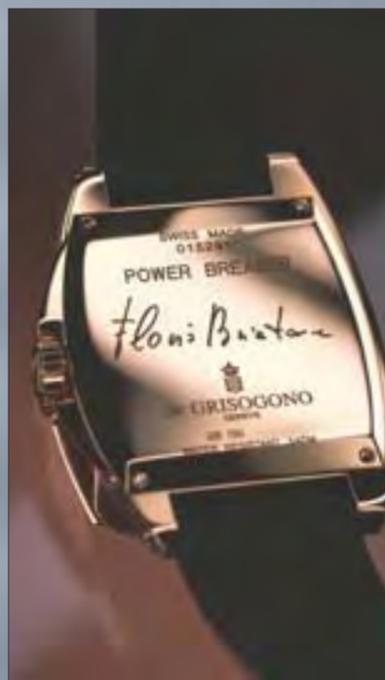
(Bottom) The first 500 Power Breaker chronographs, in all styles, feature Briatore's signature engraved on the caseback.

Bundled into a limo, and transported at speed to the port, I barely had time to enjoy Monaco's skyline of charming rooftop gardens before finding myself aboard the yacht of Flavio Briatore.

Briatore is a legend. Given the Vatican's zeal in creating saints, I am pretty sure that Briatore will soon be made the patron saint of playboys. Wherever he is - and it might be trackside at a Formula 1 Grand Prix with the Renault team that he manages, or grooving the Sardinian night away at his self-effacingly named nightclub Billionaire - he is Flavio: tight dark tee-shirt, mahogany skin, tastefully distressed jeans. It is a uniform, and a uniform that you can now buy. 'Billionaire Couture' includes 18-carat gold-buttoned jeans with humidors in which to store them to retain their softness, and shirts with special apertures on the cuff through which to view one's watch. Which brings us neatly to Flavio's watchmaking debut.

Together with his chum Fawaz Gruosi (founder of de Grisogono and jeweller and watchmaker by appointment to the jet

set) Briatore has been working on a wristwatch. Tonight, towards the end of the Cannes Film Festival and a couple of days before the start of the Monaco Grand Prix, the 'Power Breaker' will be launched at a typically splashy gala at the Eden Roc.



All aboard

The morning before his horological debut, Briatore looks his usual calm, imperturbable self, padding barefooted around his yacht, hair artfully disarranged in a knowing pastiche of Albert Einstein, untucked shirt billowing over ripped jeans. He talks of how this unique collaboration came about and how the friendship between the two men blossomed under the night skies of Sardinia.

It was not an auspicious start: "He was at the Billionaire and it was difficult for him to get in and he was a little bit fed up. One night, he had a special guest and he left because it was not the right table." But for the providential intervention of some mutual friends, these two men, so alike yet so different, might never have met. However: "When this happened, someone called me with his number and I called him and after that we have a good feeling between us." It is tempting to write-off Briatore as just another rich Neanderthal playboy. Tempting, but foolish. He may enjoy the trappings of ludicrous wealth - yacht, aircraft, endless

succession of high profile supermodel consorts, etc. - but beneath the carefully calculated casualness is a highly effective business brain. The money he enjoys today is entirely self-made. Rather than being flash for the sake of being flash (which even his staunchest supporter would have to admit) there is method in his brashness. He chose the name Billionaire for his nightclub precisely because it was deliberately provocative and arrogant. Since the season in Sardinia is very short, he takes Billionaire on tour round Italy to give the rest of his homeland a taste of this particular flavour of high life, and naturally a chance to buy the merchandise. For those who want buy deeper into brand Briatore, he is building a holiday village in Kenya. And of course, as a modern man of means, he is interested in watches.

Planting the seed

"The first watch I had was a Rolex. I don't know whether it was good or fake." Today, his tastes have matured. "I do not have a big collection. What I do is buy a watch I like, independent of the brand. For me, the watch is something that I want to change every day. Like a shirt or a pair of trousers, a watch is part of the way you are feeling."

Briatore may not strike one immediately as an aesthete, but he is surprisingly sensitive. "I was so impressed with the creativity of Fawaz. I was impressed by the design of the watches and amazed by the jewellery - the taste, the materials, how it is all put together. The difference is the creativity; there is real added value from the creativity." And out of this appreciation of the tasteful daring of de Grisogono, a desire to sign a special timepiece was born. "We spent a lot of time on this project because if I am going to sign a watch I would like it to be something that I want to wear." A little later that day, after a light lunch on Cap d'Antibes, I catch up with Fawaz Gruosi in his suite at the Majestic Hotel overlooking the Croisette in Cannes. "It started as a bit of a joke," says Gruosi of the Power Breaker's birth. "Then Flavio called me after three months and asked, 'How are you doing with the watch?'"

What had started out as a bit of laugh over supper and a bottle or two of Cristal at the Billionaire was about to turn into horological reality, as a 12-hour chronograph.



Steel and PVD-finished black steel variant (€7,000). The dial features the silhouette of an F1 steering wheel, 0.70 mm thick, punctuated by six screw heads, adding depth to the dial. The racing theme is furthered by the gearbox figures 2, 3 and 4. The watch itself is driven by an ETA automatic calibre, with Dubois-Dépraz chronograph subassembly.

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The challenge for Gruosi was to create a timepiece that was identifiably de Grisogono while also incorporating various elements that would recall Formula 1. After much thought, he decided to arrange the dial according the design of an F1 steering wheel. The case too borrows styling cues from an F1 car: viewed side-on from the left, the case echoes the design of a racing car’s nose cone; and to maintain the sleek streamlined profile, the pushpieces operating the chronograph are built into the case wall, so to be almost invisible.

The rubber strap is even permitted to bear the F1 logo and there is of course the flourish of Briatore’s signature on the caseback of the first 500.

To these motorsport elements, Gruosi has added some touches that are pure de Grisogono. Typical is the use of daringly coloured gold. De Grisogono has always liked to thumb its nose at conventional tastes, viz. its pioneering use of black diamonds. Thus, as well as conventional and gem-set versions of the Power Breaker, Gruosi is offering a brown-gold

and pink-gold colour combo that is eye-catching to say the least.

But then the Power Breaker has to be eye-catching to stand alongside such de Grisogono icons as the Instrumento Doppio - the reversible timepiece roughly the size of a small microwave oven - and the new Occhio minute repeater with camera shutter dial (see Issue 12). Certainly, the gala evening to mark the arrival of Power Breaker bore all the hallmarks of 18-carat hedonism for which de Grisogono is known.

Sparkle sparkle

As a tourist brochure would put it, the Eden Roc is a magical setting, the last rays of a setting sun gilding the coastline, with glamorous and scantily dressed crowds milling about a reconfigured swimming pool complex, strewn with Starck-esque sofas and armchairs that give it the feel of an open-air night club. I had the dubious honour of giving the welcome address and compèring the official part of the evening from a hastily erected scaffold illuminated by blinding prison camp-style spotlights.

With the official part out of the way, there were fireworks, a presentation of the Power Breaker by models in overalls, an exotic dancer performing on the scaffold, dinner for over 400 (as ever at de Grisogono events, the placement was faultless), then dancing to a troupe of French karaoke artists (the men dressed like Cab Calloway, the women doing their best to look like Mariah Carey). After bumping into the exotic-looking couturier John Galliano who was walking - or rather, being walked by - Eva Herzigova, I made my way back to the Martinez in Cannes for a well-earned night’s rest.

What is remarkable about the de Grisogono machine is its heroic capacity for partying. Reviewing the pictures of the event the following day, it looked considerably more glamorous than I remember it being. Moreover, given that until a couple of hours earlier the place had been full of sunbathing tourists, the blitzkrieg-like transformation of the area into a simmering fleshpot of beautiful people was little short of miraculous.

Fawaz Gruosi seemed pleased at the way things had gone. “Because of this, I think we might go into the F1 business,” he said gnomically, adding: “We have had some discussion with Bernie Ecclestone’s people and we are working on it.” However, he was unwilling to elaborate further - not because he was playing hard to get, rather that he had a plane to catch. With Cannes still reeling from the assault by the Power Breaker (at the time, 450 of the first 500 signed pieces had been sold) the crack de Grisogono team was already pulling out and heading for New York and yet another celebrity-studded gala; another part of its cleverly plotted strategy to thoroughly exhaust the world of watchmaking and jewellery with an excess of partying. ○

Further information: Boutique de Grisogono, 14A New Bond Street, London W1S 3SX. Tel: 020 7499 2225, www.degrisogono.com

(Right) Prior to the partying, the watch itself is unveiled at the Eden Roc. (Top to bottom) Gruosi, your author, Briatore, and Aurel Bacș - International Co-Head of Christie’s Watch Department; Gruosi is flanked by Christian Dior’s haute couturier John Galliano, and Czech supermodel Eva Herzigova; men’s magazine favourite Victoria Silvstedt at the Eden Roc, surrounded by models sporting the new Power Breaker chronograph; party-circuit regular Naomi Campbell arrives on the arm of Gruosi, to the inevitable barrage of paparazzi.



(Left) Power Breaker in pink gold and matt-finished tawny pink gold; a hue called ‘Browny Brown’ (£12,950). All models’ crowns are engraved with the de Grisogono crest and are water resistant to 30 metres.

