
Exploring the Autavia with Jack Heuer on his 85th birthday...

01 November 2017 | Alex Easthope

To commemorate Jack Heuer's 85th birthday, Tag Heuer has produced a limited-edition reissue of the legendary Autavia chronograph. And who better to quiz about the beginnings of the original Autavia, a timepiece rooted in motorsport, than the man himself?



Limited to 1,932 pieces (Jack Heuer's birth year), the new Autavia reissue was designed with input

from Mr Heuer himself, and it's said to fuse the aesthetic spirit of the original with the technology of today. As such, the watch has been enlarged to 42mm in diameter and features a contemporary self-winding movement with an impressive 80-hour power reserve. The very first piece, number 0001, will be sold at Phillips' Heuer Parade auction on 11 November, the [catalogue for which can be found listed in the Classic Driver Market](#).

The story of the Autavia is one rooted in motorsport, as the timepiece originated in the 1930s as a dash-mounted stopwatch for use on rallies and in aircraft. It wasn't until 1962 that the name adorned a wristwatch — Heuer's first sports chronograph, fitted with a signature rotating bezel. We asked Jack Heuer about how the watch came to be and how it came to pervade the upper-echelons of motorsport in the 1970s...



Could you tell us about the rallies in which you competed in the late 1950s, which led to the creation of the Auto-Rallye stopwatch and, ultimately, the Autavia chronograph?

In 1958, my first year at Ed. Heuer & Co., I participated in two local car rallies. In the first, I was driving and my co-pilot was Samuel Heuer, who was not related to our family but came from the same area. It was a good experience. So, in the second rally, I handed the driving duties over to Samuel — I was quite good at map reading, thanks to my time in the scouts, so I gladly took on the role of co-pilot.

We were doing fine until, close to the finish, I misread the dial of the 'Autavia' stopwatch by a minute, meaning we finished 3rd instead of 1st. This infuriated me, and I realised that the dial of the stopwatch was unclear, confusing, and difficult to read while on the move. Back at the factory, we created a new stopwatch with a large central minute hand, mounted it on the dashboard, and called it the 'Auto-Rallye'. With the Autavia stopwatch withdrawn and the great name, which fused 'automobile' and 'aviation', once again free, I decided to create a new Autavia as a wristwatch in the autumn of 1961.

Was the original Autavia wristwatch designed more specifically with drivers in mind?

Yes, it was. With its large diameter, clear dial, and shock resistance, it was designed to withstand the

harsh world of motorsport. In addition, its features were also very useful for pilots — it allowed them to set known time marks in advance, such as landing approach and take-off acceleration time, and it was guaranteed to function perfectly up to 35,000 feet.



Why do you think the Carrera became so much more popular than the Autavia when the latter arrived first?

Because of its sexier name, purer design, innovative construction, and aesthetic elegance.

You described Jo Siffert as a ‘born wheeler-dealer’ — how instrumental was he in spreading the word about the Autavia, particularly in the motorsport world?

Although I didn't realise it at the time, this relatively simple sponsorship contract with Siffert was probably one of the best marketing moves I ever made — because it opened the door to the world of Formula 1 for us. At all the races, Jo would wear the Heuer logo on his overalls and one of our chronographs, preferably the Autavia, on his wrist. This made the watch highly visible in the motorsport world. He also stuck a red Heuer sticker on all the cars he raced.



How did you feel when Steve McQueen opted to wear the Monaco in *Le Mans* instead of the Autavia?

In its early days, the Monaco was not a popular watch. That's why, when I received the call from Don Nunley — a property master who'd helped me with my early efforts at product placement in Hollywood films — telling me that he needed timing equipment for the filming of *Le Mans*, it made perfect sense. The Monaco was the only watch we had in stock at the time, and I was delighted when I heard that McQueen had chosen to wear a Heuer in the film instead of another watch brand. Aside from my feelings on the contrast between the Monaco and Autavia, McQueen never had the opportunity to choose between them in the end.

By the 1970s, your chronographs had become synonymous with motorsport. Was that expected, and how did it make you feel?

It was to be expected, because of the efforts we made to be present and visible in this world. Our partnership with Jo Siffert, the Monaco in *Le Mans*, and our collaboration with Ferrari made me feel good, because motorsport was a passion of mine and it also helped us communicate our innovative approach to watchmaking.





Which is your personal favourite iteration of the Autavia?

I like them all!

How did you 'make your mark' on the new limited-edition Autavia?

The dial of the new watch follows my guidelines and design rules to the letter, so I guess you can say that my 'mark' is found there.

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