

NICK FOULKES talks to Jean-Claude Biver, a man whose bold business timing and big personality have made him a legend in the world of Swiss watchmakers

TIME AND AGAIN

One day, I remember, I was enjoying a fondue with friends and I saw Jacques Piguet's watch: it was a skeleton watch, no dial, nothing but the movement, and he was wearing this watch because he was experimenting and did not need a dial. Looking at that watch I was reminded of a toy steam engine.'

Jean-Claude Biver is recounting how he first thought about getting into the watch industry. He is a big man with a big voice and an even bigger personality. As the boss of Hublot he is responsible for one of the great Lazaran revivals of the watch business. Just five years ago he took a stake in Hublot and was appointed CEO of the niche brand, now known for the Big Bang, a watch as big, as bold, as daring and as recognisable as... well, as Biver himself.

At the time I do not think that even Biver knew how successful he would be. His timing was perfect: between 2004 and 2008 the Swiss watch industry went crazy, and with Biver at the helm, the newly reborn Hublot was impeccably placed to take advantage of this bonanza. Now Biver is approaching the present crisis with the relish that he showed during the boom. As a man who recently marked his 60th birthday with a weekend-long celebration, beginning with an evening cruise on a 100-year-old steamer around Lake Geneva and finishing with a long, lazy lunch under canvas at his farm on the outskirts of Montreux, Biver has seen crises before.

When he got his first job in the watch industry, working for Audemars Piguet, the world of mechanical watchmaking was entering its darkest hour, with the arrival of quartz technology promising cheap, accurate, near-maintenance-free watches. 'That was 1975. The industry was struggling because the infection of quartz movements had started. You could feel the crisis coming: the industry was not developed, many companies were closing, many watchmakers were losing their jobs.'

Nevertheless, as a young man in his mid-20s, Biver was enchanted by the culture of watchmaking and how it was part of the Swiss way of life. He stayed with Audemars Piguet until the end of the decade when, impatient for promotion, he left to join Omega, part of SSIH, the forerunner of the industry-dominating Swatch Group, but stayed less than a year.

'I was a young man, but I was very nostalgic for that traditional art of watchmaking. I had left the traditional culture and *patrimoine* of an artisanal brand to join an industrial brand.' Then, on a visit to the legal department of SSIH to see what brands the group owned, he came across the name Blancpain, a company founded in 1735, that had been out of business for around 20 years. At a time of crisis SSIH was looking for assets to sell and with his fondue friend Jacques Piguet, whose family company Frédéric Piguet made mechanical watch movements, he decided to buy Blancpain.

'If I remember, it cost something like 22,000 Swiss francs,' he says with a broad grin, and if in retrospect this seems like a deal on a par with the one made between Dutch settlers and native Americans for the purchase of Manhattan, it has to be borne in mind that there were those who predicted the extinction of the mechanical watch. Biver's partner was intrigued by the contrapuntal idea of launching a deliberately retro brand, especially as he had a stock of unsold high-quality mechanical movements. Making clever use of the brand's 20 years of inactivity, Biver minted a catchy slogan to the effect there had never been a quartz Blancpain and never would be.

Blancpain launched in 1982 and sold 100 watches in the first year. In the beginning it was what you might call subsistence watchmaking: for instance, when a customer requested 50 gold watches, Biver had to ask him for a loan to be able to buy the gold. But what made Blancpain different was not the watches so much as the man behind them. Biver was everywhere, a maelstrom of energy, a one-man PR machine, on one occasion memorably claiming to have met the ghost of the founder in a graveyard and on another announcing with almost Delphic opacity that Blancpain was the brand of 'visible



*Hublot's Bigger Bang
Platinum Diamonds*

invisibility'. A decade later the company was turning over CHF60m a year and was in the vanguard of the traditional watch renaissance.

In the early 1990s he sold Blancpain back to what was now the Swatch Group and joined the horological colossus as a sort of internal consultant, turning his attention to his quondam employer, Omega. Once again he demonstrated his intuitive knack for timing. During the first half of the 1990s the maniacal cult of the celebrity that has come to characterise today's popular culture was not yet felt. There had of course been high-profile product endorsements in the past, but Biver moved it up a gear, creating a celebrity dream team of James Bond, Michael Schumacher and Cindy Crawford to help market Omega.

By now many times a millionaire and with an impressive track record, Biver found himself at one of life's crossroads: in 1999 he was 50 years old and the following year he became a father for the third time by his second wife Sandra. 'When my son Pierre came into this world on 29 March, 2000, I felt that I needed to start a new adventure. I said to myself: "I want this little boy to know his father as an entrepreneur."' And so, at an age when most men are considering spending more time with their golf clubs, Jean-Claude Biver began looking for new opportunities and found Hublot.

It had been a 1980s success story, mixing rubber straps with chic watches. However, by the time Biver came on the scene the brand seemed to have had its heyday and was merely ticking (excuse the pun) over. Biver has recently signed a historic sponsorship and co-branding deal with Manchester United and he uses a footballing analogy to explain his move. 'It was like playing in the Champions League with [Omega]. With Hublot I was going right down the league tables: and it takes a certain courage to start from such a low level.'

When he joined, Hublot was selling around 10,000 watches a year, with an average price of around €2,000. Today, just five short years later, 24,000 Hublots are made each year with an average selling price of €11,000. The maths are simple enough and what is more you don't have to take Biver's word for it; in the summer of 2008, LVMH bought Hublot for a figure in the region of CHF480m, making Biver's 20 per cent share worth a little shy of CHF100m.

But how was this accomplished? There is a simple, one-word answer: fusion. I remember meeting Biver in London in the summer of 2004. We were sitting in the Italian restaurant Riva and he spent quarter of an hour drawing on the tablecloth with a black marker pen to produce a diagrammatic sketch of the sun, two clouds, a tree, the Earth's crust, various arrows, the words 'HOT', 'COLD', 'FUSION', 'YIN', 'YANG', and various other arcane symbols. Having put the astronomically correct touch of eyes, nose and mouth



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to the sun he announced in a voice that stilled the restaurant: 'This is it, this is Hublot. This is fusion in watchmaking.'

There is no doubt that Biver has an intuitive gift for marketing but there is also genuine enthusiasm and enormous energy, though rather endearingly he claims to be plagued by doubt. He seizes opportunities and makes decisions as much on an emotional as a financial basis. Take for instance Hublot's sponsorship of the Alinghi team for the America's Cup. 'When I saw the words "Swiss Made" written on the hull of the boat, I felt that this was a national project of the hi-tech companies of Switzerland and I thought we had to be part of this. Hublot is using new materials and breaking new ground in watchmaking science. I don't know why Audemars Piguet [the team's previous

horological sponsor] stopped supporting it, but I was delighted to have the opportunity.' Hublot's total investment is around CHF5m but as Biver says: 'This is a truly international project.' The first Hublot Alinghi, part of the King Power line, has just come out, in a run of 333 watches.

From a financial position he has no need to work, but money has long since ceased to be of importance. It is almost as if ceaseless activity acts on him like a drug. 'My little son says: "I am so sad that you are always leaving," but I have no choice: it is like if you are a doctor.'

A few years ago he bought a farm and with his typical enthusiasm he has plunged into the rustic Alpine way of life. Each September he dons traditional dress and walks his herd from their summer pasture in the mountains to their winter quarters. He is also passionate about wine and has taken up cycling. He thinks nothing of pedalling the 65km or so between Geneva and his Montreux house.

However, wine and cycles will always be supporting players to the starring role that watches have in his life. At the moment he is obsessed with the new movement that Hublot is developing, the Unico. 'The chronograph elements are on the dial side of the movement; normally you can only watch them through a glass caseback; but with the Unico, when you take away the dial, you will be able to watch them from the front.' I point out that it could have been inspired by the watch he saw while eating the fondue all those years ago. Things have come full circle.

What next? 'I want to finish my job at Hublot,' he says, in what for him is a quiet voice, 'and that will be when our own movement will be in about 50 per cent of the watches. When we have acquired a 50 per cent autonomy I believe I am entitled to take a little rest, but I want to stay in touch with the watch industry.' I don't think there is any danger of the watch industry forgetting Jean-Claude Biver in a hurry. ■■