

FORGING AHEAD: MCLAREN AND AUDEMARS PIGUET



McLaren and Audemars Piguet are bonded by far more than a pioneering use of carbon composites. Both companies benefit from developing new technology at a stage that is free from the constraints of time and cost.

by Richard Holt photography Micha Theiner

If there was a Formula One championship for watches, with the industry's finest seeking champagne-soaked glory, Audemars Piguet would be competing for podium space with a select number of other manufacturers, the names of which will be as well-known to readers of this magazine as the faces of their immediate family.

McLaren had such a strong motorsport history that it won't be registering much more than mild concern over its current Formula One season, knowing that the failing Honda engines are nothing more than a clearing of the throat before the mighty Woking team once again starts hitting the right notes. And while McLaren may be a relative newcomer to the world of production sports cars, it can already hold its own with Italy's finest.

As well as occupying envied positions in their respective fields, Audemars Piguet and McLaren share another key characteristic. They have the freedom to experiment with new technology long before it is even considered for full-scale production, meaning that they are able to try outlandish things without having to worry too much about cost per unit, profit margin and other things that are tiresome to anybody but a spreadsheet-fetishist.

TRICKLE-DOWN TECH

McLaren Automotive, the road car division, has a trackside seat for everything that is learnt by their colleagues at McLaren Racing. That doesn't mean adapting Formula One cars for the road, because if the average punter were to drive anything even half as tricky as an F1 car, he would catapult it backwards into the nearest Nando's shortly before soiling himself. It does, however, mean finding out what works in the crucible of motor racing and seeing what has a relevance in a world where a driver's talents need to be flattered, rather than found wanting.

Audemars Piguet's equivalent is the Concept series of watches, where new ideas can be tried out before being put into either limited or full production. This is AP's motorsport division – just as Cartier has the space age Ideas & Innovation programme and Rolex has its mind-blowing science labs, to name but two others.

McLaren and AP have both led the way with the use of carbon composites. In 1981, the McLaren MP4 was the first Formula One car to use a carbon-fibre safety cell. Not only did this material give a significant weight saving over even the lightest of metals, it was also incredibly strong. There was scepticism from the other teams until the McLaren driver John Watson obligingly smashed his car into the barriers at Monza at 150mph; car parts were splattered all over the

track, but Watson was completely unscathed within his carbon tub. After that the bendy metal cage went the way of the leather crash helmet and all F1 teams went carbon before the end of the decade.

In 1988, with McLaren effecting a Senna/Prost-driven destruction of the opposition, the company thought: "This racing car business is easy, maybe we should try building a road car." The result, after four years of development, was a machine that was groundbreaking in every way except perhaps its name: the McLaren F1.

It was clocked at 240mph, a record that stood until well into this century, and it was the first road car to have a carbon-fibre chassis. But at great cost. The hand-laid chassis took 4,000 man-hours to make – fine on a car made in very limited numbers and selling for well over a million pounds in today's money, but not sustainable as a business model.

But McLaren honed that process down using production methods of which they are proud but understandably very secretive. By the time they released the 12C in 2011, production time for the tub had been cut from 4,000 hours to just four. This allowed them to build the 12C and its replacement, the 650S (the Spider version of which you see pictured here) in much greater numbers and at a far less prohibitive cost.

"When we were designing the 12C we knew from our experience in racing and with the F1 road car that carbon fibre would provide us with the best solution in terms of weight, strength and performance," said Paul McSweeney, Global Product Manager for the McLaren Super Series, which includes the 650S. "We didn't know how we were going to productionise it, but we committed to it and made it work."

CARBON FOOTPRINTS

Audemars Piguet began experimenting with carbon watch parts in the 1980s, keeping a very close eye on the aeronautical industry. It later modified a technique used to make aircraft parts by compressing heated carbon composites. The first watch with a case made from forged carbon was the limited edition Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi Team in 2007. The carbon case, as well as being very light and strong, gave each watch an individual appearance as the carbon fibres formed a unique pattern during the moulding process.

Based on the popularity of that watch, AP brought out other limited edition carbon pieces such as the Millenary Carbon One, which led to full production models such as the Royal Oak Offshore 44mm in forged carbon, the watch that you see pictured here.



Richard Holt puts a "Volcano Red" McLaren 650S Spider and an Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore 44mm in forged carbon through their paces.



"The popularity of Audemars Piguet's limited edition carbon pieces led to full production models such as the Royal Oak Offshore 44mm in forged carbon."

Another carbon concept watch, the Royal Oak Concept Laptimer Michael Schumacher – designed with Schumacher before his 2013 skiing accident, and unveiled this year at the request of his family – contains some amazing new tech within the carbon. It has an incredibly clever chronograph that allows you to time successive laps without resetting the timer for the previous lap. This is a feature which, if AP can do a bit of McLaren-style cutting of production time, could well find its way into a more mainstream model without the need for a banker's-bar-bill price tag.

Perhaps Audemars Piguet's proudest unveiling this year was the Royal Oak Concept RD#1 minute repeater. Shown off to much melodious fanfare at SIHH, the watch followed eight years of audio research to produce a watch that can sing the time more loudly and tunelessly than any other. As a sign of how seriously AP took the research, it involved input from musicians at the Conservatory of Music in Geneva and scientists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne – artistic and scientific brows don't get any higher than that.

Audemars Piguet produced its first minute-repeating wristwatch back in the 1890s and when the quaint old art of chiming watches was revived a century later, AP was among the most enthusiastic champions. It may not seem likely that minute repeaters will ever become truly mainstream. But then imagine the hollow laughter if you had suggested, 35 years ago that, as the 21st century got into its fully computerised stride, some of our greatest brains would still

be focused on developing mechanical watches based on a design from an era when leeches were considered a vital part of cutting-edge medicine. So who is to say that, as the production processes become slicker, the minute repeater couldn't become as accessible a complication as the chronograph is today?

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Earlier this year, McLaren unveiled new entry level models, which will also have carbon tubs, as well as other motorsport-developed tech such as the brake steer and drag reduction systems which slow you down and propel you around corners in a manner that you will put down to the simple brilliance of your driving. None of this stuff could have existed without the boundaries being pushed by motorsport, and by blank-cheque limited editions. And where one manufacturer lays tyre tracks, others follow. How long before every new car you sit in is as tough as a carbon-tubbed racing car?

Seeing as we are no more likely to stop wearing mechanical watches than we are to stop driving to the shops, the tech will keep trickling down from the experimental to the every day. As long as the likes of AP and McLaren continue to try things out in a way that is unfettered by such tedious considerations as profit margin, eventually every driver and watch lover benefits. Champagne all round! *

Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore 44mm, courtesy of Marcus, Bond Street.

MARCUS MARGULIES OWNER OF TIME PRODUCTS



As a life-long watch collector, manufacturer, distributor and retailer, Marcus Margulies has more authority than most to comment on the watch industry.

by Tracy Llewellyn photography Luke Carby

"In the 1990s, Time Products was king. We would walk into the Basel fair and buy the 100 most expensive products on show. But it's a different world now, values have changed."

YOU HAVE SPENT YOUR ENTIRE ADULT LIFE WORKING WITH WATCHES, WOULD YOU SAY YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR THEM?

Not particularly, at least not any more. I like some watches – I think we all do – and there are definitely some interesting people in the trade that I admire.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON PEOPLE BUYING WATCHES AS INVESTMENTS?

I find it so sad when people don't have a mind of their own when it comes to what they are buying and when all they care about is what the watch will be worth in five years' time. Buying for investment is stupid because things change too quickly. There is one watch that I bought for £600 and sold 30 years later for a 100-times mark-up. There are other things I have bought on which I'd be lucky to get half my cost.

DO YOU THINK THERE IS A CEILING ON WHAT A WATCH CAN REALISTICALLY BE WORTH?

The industry can no longer justify crazy pricing. To compare watches to the art world, Damien Hirsts are now fetching half what they did five years ago – it will be interesting to see what his pieces make in another five years.

YOU RECENTLY STOPPED DISTRIBUTING HUBLOT IN THE UK, ARE YOU DELIBERATELY PULLING BACK ON THAT AREA OF THE BUSINESS?

No, I'm not pulling back. I still own the Hublot Bond Street store, but things have changed. In the 1990s, Time Products was king. We would walk into the Basel fair and buy the 100 most expensive products on show. But it's a different world now, values have changed. This happened when the groups took over. They run their businesses on a financial model that takes precedence over everything else. I would do exactly the same thing if I was running one of the big groups.

SO WHAT ARE THE VARIOUS AREAS OF TIME PRODUCTS?

My father founded Time Products when he came to England in 1931. We started Sekonda in 1966 and acquired Accurist in 2014 because it's a great name and a level above Sekonda. Along with the Marcus store in Bond Street, which specialises in luxury Swiss timepieces, it gives us complete vertical integration. And with Sekonda and Accurist we have a 17–18 per cent market share in the UK, which is huge.

YOU HAVE SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTERESTING BRANDS IN MARCUS. HOW DO YOU CHOOSE WHAT TO STOCK THERE?

I can't afford not to be particular. I like and respect all of the watchmakers I work with but, at the end of the day, they would all like me to move more stock. However, I will only do it my way. I am in the very lucky position that I do this absolutely for pleasure and if it's a bad year I can still live well so I am in a very strong position. I am not totally profit driven – if I was I would get out of the retail business altogether.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL WATCH COLLECTION.

My Audemars Piguet collection is unique – it's actually much better than the brand's own. I also have some gorgeous Piaget jewellery watches, including 15–18 of the cuffs – they are stunning and although the modern re-issues are incredibly expensive and made with the help of modern technology, they are nowhere near as beautiful as the originals.

I bought a Greubel Forsey for myself but hardly ever wear it as my eyesight is not what it used to be and the dial is difficult to read. Fortunately they are currently working on a solution to this. I have a Royal Oak, which I think is the best sports watch ever made and I also inherited my father's extra-thin platinum Audemars Piguet – still one of the most beautiful watches the brand has produced. But a lot of the time I wear a Sekonda, it amuses me to confuse people with it! They all think it is worth so much more because I am wearing it, and it is amazing value for money. *