

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

SWISS WATCHMAKER ZENITH TOOK ITS MONIKER MOST LITERALLY WHEN IT PARTNERED WITH RED BULL AND AUSTRIAN SKYDIVER FELIX BAUMGARTNER, **WRITES NORMAN BURNS.**

For almost 150 years, Zenith's beautifully crafted, finely engineered, Swiss timepieces have wowed watch cognoscenti and yet remained largely 'invisible' to the man in the street. That all changed last October when Felix Baumgartner, in a crazy mix of Buck Rogers derring-do and scientific venture, stepped out of a perfectly airworthy balloon 39,045 metres above New Mexico and leapt head-first into the record books.

Baumgartner, 43, plunged through the atmosphere in free-fall for four minutes and 20 seconds, reaching an incredible 1342km/h before opening his parachute to land safely in the desert. He became the first human to break the sound barrier in free-fall, securing his place in aviation and space history.

While energy drink maker Red Bull bankrolled Baumgartner's dream turned reality, Zenith was also along for the ride. Every aspect of such a mission, where even the slightest slip-up could see Baumgartner making the headlines for all the wrong reasons, had to be planned down to the split-second.

It was the perfect fit for Zenith, a watchmaker that introduced the world's most accurate automatic mechanical movement, the El Primero, capable of measuring slices of time to 1/10th of a second way back in 1969.

"We were very attracted to the idea. In assisting him to his dream we would become the first watch to break the sound barrier in a near-space environment," says Zenith CEO, Jean-Frederic Dufour.

So, with a Zenith El Primero Stratos strapped to the outside of his spacesuit Baumgartner took the plunge. Millions watched the event live on TV and a staggering eight-million live on YouTube – a record

in itself. And the resulting publicity was well beyond even Dufour's wildest dreams.

"Our main expectation was to send an incredible and unique Swiss watch manufacture to the edge of space. However, to be honest, we did not expect such a great visibility."

Apart from a specially-developed Velcro strap to ensure it didn't fall off during the violent nine-minute drop, Baumgartner's El Primero Stratos Flyback Striking 10th model was identical to that already available to the public. Subjected to extreme G-forces, violent pressure changes and temperatures plunging to -68°C, the timepiece was in perfect working order when Baumgartner touched down, just as Zenith anticipated.

"Having a watch I can rely was more than a convenience – it was an essential tool," said Baumgartner, who has now retired from the daredevil business to become a commercial helicopter pilot.

"The Stratos watch has the world's most accurate automatic chronograph movement and its striking 10th function is great because it reads off 1/10th of a second and also has a flyback feature that enables instant resetting in one move. That's super-efficient for the work we were doing."

But precision has always been a Zenith cornerstone, from the time founder Georges Favre-Jacot started the business in Le Locle in 1865, where its headquarters still remain today.

Rather than have artisans working in isolation on each component of his watches, Favre-Jacot brought all aspects of watchmaking under one roof.



a visionary move that saw Zenith swiftly surpass rivals in technical innovation and, importantly, quality control. And, in the 150 years since, Zenith's trophy cabinet has overflowed with industry awards while its patent count has exceeded 300.

But despite the fantastic publicity generated by Baumgartner's leap of faith, Zenith is not likely to stray far from its core market of painstakingly produced pieces blending luxury with precision.

"As a manufacture, each Zenith features a Zenith movement. We cannot propose models for the lower end of the market, however we always try to propose the right price corresponding to the quality of our watches. As proof we have just won the Petite Aiguille Prize from the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Geneve (for the Pilot Big Date Special). This prize rewards a watch with a retail price of under 7500 Swiss francs," explains Dufour.

The El Primero Chronometer remains Zenith's top seller but the brand's portfolio is diverse, from the spectacular 57mm Pilot Montre D'Aeronef Type 20 to the striking Zenith Star Open women's watch.

Whilst committed to refining traditional designs, Zenith isn't content to simply rest on its laurels either. Innovation is every bit as important as brand heritage.

"For example, tialum (a mix of titanium and aluminium) or silicon as it has a lot of promising potential thanks to its specific properties such as lightness and elimination of lubrication," Dufour offers.

And even though most Zenith models sit at the top end of the market, there is still one watch that no amount of money will buy – the Stratos that plunged to Earth with Baumgartner, who doesn't plan to part with it any time soon ■

EL PRIMERO'S VITAL STATS

NINE ■ Number of months required to produce a single El Primero movement

TEN ■ Number of vibrations per second that make the El Primero the world's most accurate series-produced automatic caliber

EIGHTEEN ■ Number of different metals in the classic El Primero

TWENTY ■ Number of watchmakers involved in producing each El Primero movement

FIFTY ■ Number of milling operations on the El Primero dial side

SEVENTY-SEVEN ■ Number of milling operations on the El Primero bridge side