

GOING FOR THE GOAL

WATCHES AND SOCCER



The game Americans know as football is not a popular sport internationally. Outside the boundaries of the US, the word “football” has a completely different meaning—soccer. And if there is one sport that is worshipped globally, it has to be soccer. Strangely enough, soccer has been one of the last major sports to be sponsored by the watch companies. Golf, tennis, motor racing, horse riding, polo, even swimming have been more popular with the big brands, but when you consider the billions of fans who follow soccer, what better sport for watch companies to be involved in if they want to spread the word about their brands? Recently, two high-profile brands, Hublot and Ebel, have partnered with renowned soccer clubs, joining others who got into the game early. This is good news for soccer fans and watch lovers.

Le Locle-based Tissot has been involved in soccer for more than ten years, English soccer player Michael Owen serving as an ambassador. Tissot resisted working with leagues or clubs and decided to choose the young and up-and-coming Owen, who has turned into the perfect ambassador for the brand, immensely popular around the world, especially in Asia. “We as a brand



*The Tissot PRS 200 and
Tissot ambassador Michael Owen*

don’t sponsor teams; we do the timekeeping or we work with individuals, like Michael Owen, Nicky Hayden and Danica Patrick,” says Bernie Schreiber, international sponsorship manager at Tissot. “We wanted Owen because he was part of the English national team.”

“Soccer is a tribal kind of game, with strong loyalties and strong emotions about other teams, but no one dislikes Michael,” Schreiber continues. “He’s well spoken; he just wants to play soccer and play it well. He’s not a polarizing force. In 2002, we introduced the first watch dedicated to him as a limited edition, and every one we have done with him since has sold out.” The latest timepiece to honor Owen is a Tissot PRS 200 and marks the tenth anniversary of Owen’s ambassadorship of the brand. Look out for Owen in shop windows, because his image is used in advertising across Tissot’s product range, including ads for the T-Touch.

JeanRichard has had a partnership with the Italian soccer club Juventus for seven years. During this time, JeanRichard has made limited edition watches and organized events during which retailers, journalists and friends of the brand attend matches. “In 2002, when we started, it was really something new,” says Massimo Macaluso, president, JeanRichard. “We were the first brand to do something with a soccer team, something linked to haute horlogerie. Everyone goes to the matches, the employees and the CEOs. We have had four different limited editions dedicated to Juventus; the last one launched in 2008.”

Recently, Hublot signed on as the official timekeeper and official timepiece of the Euro Cup 2008, held in Switzerland and Austria. Hublot took full advantage of the event to invite cus-

tomers, journalists and retail partners to the full slate of games. “The first reason Hublot got involved in soccer is that it is a sport that has no boundaries; its appeal extends from men to women, from rich to poor, from old to young—everyone loves it,” says Jean-Claude Biver, president, Hublot. “There is huge money in soccer, brought in by billionaire business people, and the players are highly paid, so there is a place for luxury. These soccer players are quite important because their prestige transfers to us. In soccer, players, trainers and coaches are heavy watch buyers, so it makes sense.”

The Euro Cup 2008 resulted in unbelievable exposure for Hublot, according to Biver. “We met people we never could have met before, since they would not have come to any other event Hublot might have invited them to,” he says. “They only came because it was soccer. Now, I know people I never could have known before, like the president of Greece, and they are aware of Hublot, which is huge.”

After the Euro Cup 2008 experience, Biver was eager to continue Hublot’s connection with soccer while waiting to sponsor the 2012 Euro Cup, and the result is an agreement with the legendary soccer club Manchester United, arguably the most famous soccer club in the world. Biver hopes that the association will continue to spread awareness of Hublot watches. “Manchester United is the team that cannot lose, because it is a legend and a brand,” he explains. “It is one of the few brands that has reached the top of the top where winning or losing one game doesn’t matter any more. Our partnership is for three years, but I hope it will be for even longer.” Hublot has inaugurated the partnership with



*FC Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri received the limited edition Bressel Classic
Chronograph from JeanRichard managing director Massimo Macaluso in Hong Kong.*





at left—Hublot's Red Devil Bang black ceramic chronograph displaying a 45-minute counter, the duration of a football match half and dial sporting the celebrated Manchester United Red Devil logo.

Manchester United by creating a limited edition Red Devil Bang (500 pieces worldwide). In a nod to the game itself, the chronograph minutes counter, traditionally 30 minutes, is engineered to indicate 45 minutes—the length of half a game.

As time goes on, more watch brands are seeing the advertising and marketing value of being associated with soccer teams. Like Hublot, Ebel is a relative newcomer to soccer team sponsorship and has already partnered with a slate of six high-profile clubs: Arsenal, FC Bayern Munich, Real Madrid, Ajax Amsterdam, Glasgow Rangers and Olympic Lyon. “We chose soccer for a dozen reasons, because it makes so much sense,” details Marc Michel-Amadry, president and creative director for Ebel SA. “Soccer is the most global sport in the world, so its reach is incredibly wide. Everything has become more prestigious—the clubs

have the best equipment; the best stadiums are designed by the world’s premier architects; the clubs have the best websites and are promoted around the world (including in Asia, Europe, South America). They have become brands and powerful platforms for conveying their message and their values around the world. All this makes a lot of sense for a luxury brand.”

For each of the clubs Ebel works with, the brand designs and produces limited edition watches. “We don’t put any signs or logos on the dial of the watch,” Michel-Amadry hastens to add. “These watches are high-end luxury watches; they are not promotional items.”

Despite the sport’s reach and popularity, soccer partnerships are not without risk for the brands that get involved. First, many soccer fans are staunchly loyal, so when a brand produces a rival



at right—The Ebel 1911 Tekton Ajax limited edition chronograph, designed to display elapsed time in the 45-minute half of a match. below—Team Arsenal celebrating victory.



club’s watch, some soccer fans may stop considering that brand for their own purchases. However, Michel-Amadry is quick to point out that the customer for these high-end watches is not the soccer hooligan, but the educated person who appreciates fine watches and wants a link to soccer. In addition, Ebel’s target also includes the future watch purchaser. “I am interested in the person who in five years will be able to afford an Ebel watch,” he says. “It’s not just to reach the people who can buy one watch today, but it’s also to plant the seeds. We will expand to more clubs in the future—in two to three years, Ebel will have ten to twelve clubs.”

There is also the risk of being associated with a club that loses or, worse, is caught doing something illegal. That was the case with Juventus, which was convicted of game-fixing in 2006. JeanRichard was able to weather the storm of that controversy, but

when bad things happen, sponsors can often be painted with the same brush as the club.

In the end, the advantages of soccer partnerships have far outweighed the risks, at least for these prestigious watch brands. Most games of the biggest clubs and the biggest competitions are seen around the world, so the sponsor’s message reaches people everywhere. Soccer is loved worldwide, so it seems a no-brainer for watch lovers who also love soccer to buy a timepiece that combines their two passions. As other brands see the success that Ebel, Hublot, Tissot and JeanRichard have had, expect to see more try to score a goal or two on the soccer field. ♦

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