

Momentum

In the world of watchmaking, the regatta timer is unique. But even if the closest you get to competitive sailing is watching yachts jockeying for position from the Manly ferry, the regatta timer could be a good investment, says **Norman Burns**, with modern and vintage models becoming highly collectible.

TIMED TO THE LINE



The expression “fits like a glove” perfectly describes the relationship between watchmaking and sailing. Top watchmakers have a strong sense of tradition yet are always looking to incorporate lightweight, strong, ultra-durable materials into their models (think carbon fibre and titanium), just as yacht builders are continually pushing the boundaries in construction.

Then there is the purely aesthetic element of design. Watches and sailboats can be things of beauty that possess an “X factor” that goes way beyond mere engineering or technological prowess.

The formal rules of sailing were first proposed in the mid 1800s but it was not until 1907 that a world body for the sport was formed: The International Yacht Racing Union, now known as World Sailing. And it was around this time that clockmakers and watchmakers saw the potential for specialist timepieces – initially on a fob or pocket stopwatch – for competitive sailing.

Thus was born the regatta timepiece, a nifty piece of chronometry which, via operating the crown or a special pusher, counts down the critical lead-up to the start of a sailing race. There is a unique challenge in sailboat racing. Unlike cars or horses, it is virtually impossible for sailboats to be lined up stationary on the start line. For the race start, skippers need to manoeuvre their craft to be in a prime position, but without infringing the start line and incurring a penalty. Being able to time this to the second is crucial.

Engineering a countdown timer was one thing; translating the mechanics into a simple, easy-to-read design was another.

One of the earliest creations was patented by Swiss company Berna (an ancestor of today’s mega-brand Tag Heuer), which used a “dot display” system on the dial. Each red dot represented a minute, with the dots changing colour sequentially as the countdown to the race start progressed. The dot design proved to be a winner and variants are still used today in modern regatta timers, although the wristwatch has long surpassed the pocket watch in popularity. →

There is no doubt the regatta timer is something of a niche model, even in the somewhat eccentric world of watchmaking. However, niche translates to good business when millions around the world sail for fun or competitively and events such as the America's Cup or Volvo Ocean Race offer the perfect platform for watchmakers to strut their stuff. Which is why big hitters such as Rolex, Ulysse Nardin, Tag Heuer and Omega, among others, offer regatta timers.

Of course, there is a myriad of digital regatta timers on the market but the beauty of mechanical models is that, as well as having a functional tool on deck, you get to wear a fantastic dress watch in the clubhouse.

Regatta timepieces, many of which were made in limited numbers, are also becoming highly collectible, attracting watch fans the world over.

Dutchman Mark Reichardt runs *regatta-yachttimers.com*, a treasure trove of images, drawings and stories of the regatta timer's evolution, including great examples from the 50s and 60s. His "Holy Grail" is the Leonidas stopwatch regatta timer from the 50s, sporting a red dot countdown design.

"Vintage examples [of regatta timers] vary from 500 euro for a Memosail to 1,000 euro for Aquastar, Tissot or Lemanía models, to a couple of thousand euro for Heuer pieces," says Reichardt. Other models which collectors hotly pursue include Wakmann, Breitling and Tutima.

And even in today's digital universe, watchmakers are striving for ever-more sophisticated improvements to their mechanical timepieces; and those made for regattas are no exception.

At the recent prestigious Grand Prix D'Horlogerie in Geneva, the sports watch prize went to Ulysse Nardin for its unfathomably clever Marine Regatta, which incorporates a new, patented countdown timer mechanism that not only ticks off the crucial minutes before a race but also then automatically starts timing the race.

And if you are more of a watch fan than a competitive sailor, bear in mind that new-model regatta timers are produced in very limited numbers, and are likely to become highly collectible.

Here's a selection of podium-worthy timepieces on the market today...



Rolex Yacht-Master II



Nautically-themed watches have been a staple of the Rolex canon ever since the company was launched in the early 1900s. The famous waterproof Oyster case – as well as impeccable attention to detail in materials, movement and engineering – helped Rolex become the world's premier luxury watch brand. But it was not until 2010 that Rolex launched its first regatta timer, the spectacular Yacht-Master II (44mm), which cleverly features a rotating outer bezel to set the countdown time (from one to 10 minutes) for a race. But wait; there's more. If the wearer has missed the first starting signal, they can set the countdown timer "on the fly" to synchronise with the race start. For this watch, Rolex came up with an entirely new movement, the Calibre 4161, which includes all the usual above-and-beyond engineering features Rolex prides itself on (ultra-accurate chronometer rating, that Oyster waterproof case, screw-down winding crown and more). Rolex has other models in the Yacht-Master family, most spectacular being the Yacht-Master 40, its 18-karat gold case framed by a bezel set with 32 sapphires, eight tasvorite gemstones and a diamond at 12 o'clock.

rolex.com



Ulysse Nardin Marine Regatta



Luxury Swiss brand Ulysse Nardin put in the hard yards to develop an ingenious (and patented) new regatta timer with the speccy Marine Regatta (44mm, water resistant to 100 metres, automatic UN-155 movement) and the effort paid off handsomely with the watch winning Best Sports Watch at Geneva's 2017 Grand Prix D'Horlogerie. The company's watch boffins have cleverly tweaked the countdown mechanism so that it not only marks off the minutes to a race but automatically begins timing the race (displayed in a sub-dial at six o'clock) once count down hits zero. Ulysse Nardin developed the watch with input from sailors in Artemis Racing, its official America's Cup team partner. Available for AU\$23,000 (blue and silver dials) or special Artemis Racing edition (just 35 pieces worldwide) for AU\$43,600 ulyssse-nardin.com



Bremont Regatta II Oracle Team USA



Only a few years old, Britain's Bremont instantly made a mark in the luxury watch business with aviation timepieces but has expanded rapidly, and successfully, into other fields including sailing. It launched its first regatta timer in 2016 and this year was appointed Official Timing Partner of the America's Cup held in Bermuda. To coincide with the Cup, the brand launched new Regatta II models, including the Regatta II OTUSA (individually numbered white- or black-dial variants, limited to 235 of each worldwide) which features a regatta timer (15-minute and five-minute countdown) at 12 o'clock on the dial. The watch even incorporates carbon fibre from the 2013 America's Cup champion Oracle Team USA AC72 yacht in the crown. AU\$9,000 bremont.com



Officine Panerai Luminor 1950 Regatta Oracle Team USA 3 Days Chrono Flyback



Italy's Panerai was a pioneer in dive watches and its big, bold and beautiful offerings have generated a cult following across the world. Stepping into the world of high-end yacht racing, Panerai became the official watch partner of this year's America's Cup, producing an official 2017 America's Cup watch (the Luminor Marina 1950 America's Cup 3 Days Automatic Acciaio) plus tie-in watches for Cup Defender Team Oracle and Japan's SoftBank Challenger. Of three editions for Team Oracle, the striking Luminor 1950 Regatta Oracle Team Chrono Flyback is as big as its name (47mm), featuring a three-day power reserve, ultra-strong but light titanium case, and a version of the regatta timer. A red pusher at four o'clock operates the central red chronograph hand, which moves in one-minute jumps to set the countdown position. A start/stop pusher at 10 o'clock then kicks off the race countdown, which can also be reset on the fly without having to futz around with the stop/reset procedure. With an engraved case back featuring the Oracle boat, and limited to just 200 pieces worldwide, this is a true collector's piece. The Officine Panerai America's Cup models are available in Australia exclusively through Watches of Switzerland. watchswiss.com



Omega Speedmaster X-33 Regatta ETNZ Limited Edition



Switzerland's Omega has been on board New Zealand's America's Cup challenge since 1995, under the legendary Sir Peter Blake, and released two models for Emirates Team NZ (ETNZ) for this year's racing: the 45mm Speedmaster X-33 Regatta (2,017 pieces worldwide) and Seamaster Planet Ocean ETNZ Deep Black. The watches must have played their part, as ETNZ took home the coveted trophy. The very cool X-33 features a dual analog/digital display, with the red pusher at 10 o'clock on the dial that operates the race countdown function and race timer, and the wearer is able to record a "logbook" of up to two races. There is also a raft of other functions – including alarms, perpetual calendar and chronograph – all powered by an Omega quartz movement. omegawatches.com

TNG Team Sailing Gents Limited Edition



TNG stands for “tack ‘n’ gybe”, so this Dutch brand means business when it comes to specialist sailing timepieces. Founded in 1998, TNG offers a range of Swiss-made watches with quartz or automatic movements, all with a distinct nautical theme and developed with the input of top international sailors. Its flagship model is the limited-edition Classic Tornado Sailing Chronograph, which features a five- or 10-minute countdown setting with a five-dot display. Water resistant to 100 metres, the 44mm watch comes in three variants and sports a 42-hour power reserve. TNG has also released a range of quartz-powered models to mark being official timekeeper with Team AkzoNobel for the 2017-18 Volvo Ocean Race. The Team Sailing Gents Limited Edition (AU\$675), a slick-looking piece, is water-resistant to 100 metres, has the countdown timer on a sub-dial at nine o'clock, and features an engraved case back.

TNG Team AkzoNobel watches will be available at the AkzoNobel Team Base in Melbourne's Volvo Ocean Race Village from 2 to 16 January 2018
tngwatches.com



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Tag Heuer Aquaracer Calibre 72 Countdown Chronograph



It is only fitting that Tag Heuer is a member of the exclusive regatta timer club; after all, its long-forgotten ancestor Berna was one of the originators of the idea. The Aquaracer Calibre 72 (43mm, water-resistant to 500 metres) has the countdown indicator at 12 o'clock on the dial, plus sub-dials for minutes and running seconds, and comes with a choice of either steel or black rubber bracelet. AU\$6,800
tagheuer.com/en-au



Alpina Sailing Yachttimer Countdown



Switzerland's Alpina released just 8,888 pieces of its cool looking Yachttimer Countdown (44mm, stainless steel case, transparent case back, water-resistant to 300 metres). The Yachttimer Countdown features a central window (from 12 o'clock to four o'clock on the dial) which displays a 10-minute countdown sequence culminating in the word START on a bright orange fluorescent background. The user can also halt the countdown and restart it at the touch of a button.
lionbrandsaustralia.com.au