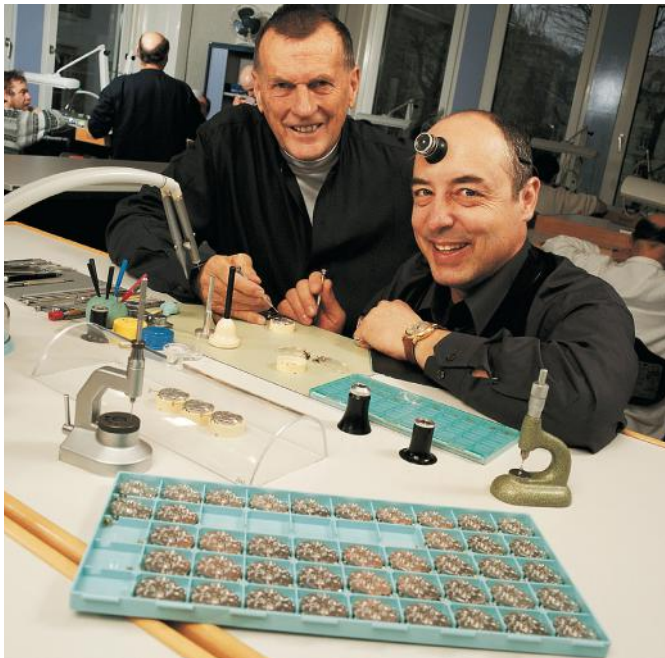


# HOFFMANN ON A MISSION

*Ulysse Nardin's new CEO aims to make technological advances, while retaining the brand's distinct culture.*

BY NEHA S. BAJPAI





*Schnyder and Oeschlin together created wildly unconventional timepieces*

In March, just a day before Baselworld opened its doors to the usual fanfare, Ulysse Nardin put up its own little show in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Left over from winter, a careless stream of icy wind welcomed journalists from all over the world to this small Swiss town in the Jura Mountains. Long a watchmaking centre, and home to brands like TAGHeuer, Breitling, Girard-Perregaux, Corum, Cartier, Jaquet Droz and, of course, Ulysse Nardin, which has its factory here since 2003, La Chaux-de-Fonds is always an exciting place to be.

What took us to Ulysse Nardin was an announcement by CEO Patrik Hoffmann of a new base movement in the UN lineup. Historically known for its robust marine chronometers used for nautical navigation, Ulysse Nardin secured its position as one of the very few remaining independent luxury watch firms by launching its own serialised automatic movement Calibre UN-118 this year. It was an occasion for the brand, especially for Hoffmann, who is filling the big shoes of his predecessor, the late Rolf Schnyder, quite nicely.

Focussed and well-grounded, Hoffmann's approach to corporate strategy and business expansion isn't very different from Schnyder's. Counting the launch of UN-118 as a milestone in Ulysse Nardin's history, he plans to push the brand's in-house movement production from the current 25 per cent to 70 per cent over the next few years. "This is the first time we have launched a base movement that will be produced in relatively large numbers. It is also a proof that Ulysse Nardin is serious in terms of independence," he says. "This year we will produce 3,000 movements of calibre UN-118 and next year it will be somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 movements. Another base movement is in production and assembly will start towards the end of this year."

Born and brought up in Basel, Hoffmann has been in the watch industry for almost three decades. He started as an accountant with Oris, pursued an MBA from the University of Michigan soon after, and joined the company's marketing team. During a stint in Malaysia for Oris in the late 90s, Schnyder offered Hoffmann a job with Ulysse Nardin and



*Ulysse Nardin's Trilogy of Time: the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, Planetarium Copernicus and Tellurium Johannes Kepler*

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he declined. The idea of moving lock, stock and barrel to UN's headquarters in Le Locle, where everyone spoke French, wasn't quite appealing to Hoffmann, but Schnyder was bent upon getting him on board. Hoffmann finally gave in when Schnyder asked him to open Ulysse Nardin's subsidiary in the US and also develop the brand in Canada and the Caribbean.

Like Schnyder's other critical decisions that worked wonders for the brand, this, too, turned out to be just right. Hoffmann worked closely with retailers and collectors in the US market, which soon turned out to be the biggest success for Ulysse Nardin. "Although we were badly positioned in the US market, some watch collectors knew the brand," recalls Hoffmann. "The immediate challenge was to convince major retailers that Ulysse Nardin was a brand with a future. On the brand's 150th anniversary in 1996, we made a big push with the introduction of the Marine Chronometer collection, which was and is still an appealing collection for a broader audience. It has become an iconic timepiece. The introduction of the Ludwig Perpetual was also instrumental in our success in the US."

In 2008, Schnyder entrusted Hoff-



*The Ulysse Nardin Marine Chronometer Manufacture*

mann with the responsibility of Ulysse Nardin's international affairs and he started dividing time between Switzerland and the US. "Having worked outside my home country for 17 years, I finally moved back to Switzerland last year, but I have to admit, I miss Florida's good weather," he says.

Over the last decade, Hoffmann became an intrinsic part of the core management team that Schnyder relied upon. Today, as the company's new chief, Hoffmann feels his most important duty is to keep Ulysse Nardin's distinct culture alive. "Rolf Schnyder was a down-to-earth person with lot of courage," he says. "He trusted his team of managers

and the staff. Ulysse Nardin is an independent family-owned company, a fact that has marked the brand's culture all through. It is important for me to keep this alive within our dedicated team."

Schnyder died of acute pancreatitis last year, but there is so much that he has left behind not just for Ulysse Nardin to follow but for the entire watch industry. Schnyder was one of the founding fathers of the mechanical watch renaissance. He bought a financially crippled Ulysse Nardin in 1983 and turned around its fortunes within no time. He took over a company with just two people and built it into one of the most innovative brands in the Swiss watch industry.



## SPECS

ULYSSE NARDIN MARINE CHRONOMETER  
MANUFACTURE

**Movement:** Automatic, UN-118 calibre, COSC certified, 11½ lignes, 50 jewels, 60-hour power reserve, Diamonsil lever escapement with patented silicon oscillator and balance spring.

**Functions:** Hours, minutes, seconds, date and power-reserve indicator

**Case:** 18k pink gold, titanium and gold, or steel and titanium, 45 mm 18k pink gold or titanium bezel. Anti-reflective sapphire crystal and transparent back. Water-resistant to 200m/20 ATM

**Dial:** Snow-white grand feu enamel; power-reserve indicator at 12 o'clock. Small seconds and date window with magnifier at 6 o'clock

**Bracelet/strap:** Black leather or rubber strap with 18k pink gold or titanium elements with folding clasp, or bracelet in 18k pink gold, two-tone titanium and 18k gold or two-tone titanium and steel

Ulysse Nardin's Marine Chronometer Manufacture will be produced at the brand's new semi-automated assembly in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Equipped with the much-talked about calibre UN-118, the watch has a 60-hour power-reserve, 248-component construction and a user-friendly date function. The escapement comprises a silicon hairspring, Diamonsil pallet lever and escape wheel, and an in-house inertia-regulated balance wheel. Except the case and the sapphire glass, all components of this watch are made in-house. The watch is available in a 350-piece limited edition with 18k rose gold case and a normal edition with titanium case. The limited edition comes with an alligator leather or rubber strap, or a solid rose gold bracelet. Each of these three timepieces comes with a grand feu enamel dial created at Ulysse Nardin's Donzé Cadran subsidiary in Le Locle.



In the quartz era, when most watch firms had lost faith in mechanical timepieces, Schnyder introduced a watch (essentially a miniature version of a clock that he spotted in a clock-restoration workshop in Lucerne) which could tell the times of solar and lunar eclipses, true solar time, the presiding astrological sign and also the position of the moon and stars. Called the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, this was the first watch that marked Ulysse Nardin's long-term partnership with Ludwig Oeschlin, an extraordinary scientist, historian, philosopher and watchmaker.





Hoffman went on to produce the Planetarium Copernicus, Tellurium Johannes Kepler, the GMT watch, the Perpetual Ludwig and Ulysse Nardin's most popular timepiece to date—the Freak. Schnyder and Oeschlin created wildly unconventional timepieces that pushed the limits of traditional watchmaking. The duo also experimented with unusual movement component materials like silicon, which is now widely popular in the watch industry. The first Freak (launched in 2001) incorporated silicon in its movement. Later, Schnyder introduced the Freak Diamond Heart, which used dia-

monds for escape wheels.

Hoffmann will continue Ulysse Nardin's strong collaboration with Oeschlin. Ulysse Nardin recently announced that it has invested in Oeschlin's company, Ochs und Junior. The mutual commitment is part of a long-term strategy that aims to establish a stronger synergy between the two companies. "Most important, it serves to consolidate and sustain the relationship between Ludwig Oeschlin and Ulysse Nardin after his planned retirement as curator and director of the MIH (The Museum of International Horology in La Chaux-de-Fonds) in 2014," explains Hoffmann.

The new Calibre UN-118 holds up the tradition. The escapement is made of Diamonsil, a combination of slick, flexible silicon with hard and durable synthetic diamond. This is the first movement from Ulysse Nardin to feature an in-house-produced Diamonsil escapement in conjunction with a silicon balance wheel with adjustable screws and silicon (111) hairspring.

Over the past decade, Ulysse Nardin has invested 80 million Swiss Francs to produce watch movements in-house and strengthen its position as an independent firm. The manufacture has grown from just 25 people in 1999 to 300 today. The brand produces 28,000 watches a year and is looking at a significant increase in numbers with its integrated quality control and assembly line. "When Rolf Schnyder passed away, the company was in a very healthy state and with a clear direction. There is no need for the new management to turn the wheels around. We will continue to develop and produce innovative mechanical timepieces by using newer materials like silicon and Diamonsil," says Hoffmann.

Apart from watchmaking, Ulysse Nardin has now branched out to luxury mobile phones and writing instruments. In 2008, it introduced the Chairman

(priced at ₹8 lakh onwards), a luxury Android phone produced in collaboration with SCI Innovations. The phone incorporates a small built-in mechanical rotor at the back to generate kinetic energy that supplies additional power to the phone. On the screen, the user can display an image of a Ulysse Nardin watch for timekeeping purposes. Last year, the brand tied up with Italian writing instrument specialist Visconti to launch a limited-edition fountain pen inspired by the brand's craft traditions and design characteristics.

For Hoffmann, the way forward is very clear. He has some big plans for the brand but everything will unfold "step by step". "We want to serve the needs in each market and have our feet firmly planted. The big growth is going to be in India, eastern Europe, Brazil and, of course, China," he says. "We were one of the few initial brands that believed in India. We invested in the market in a big way two years ago and we are continuing to do so. The market has great potential. We have the right product in the right price category in India."

Riding high on the success of their ladies' watches, especially the Caprice (priced at ₹5 lakh onwards) and Lady Dual Time (priced at ₹6 lakh onwards) in India, Ulysse Nardin plans to introduce a 'surprise' to the category by the end of this year. "In 2011, over 30 per cent of our turnover in units came from the sales of ladies watches world-wide. In this category, we had the highest number of sales in India," says Hoffmann. "Fashion is helping us grow in India. Bigger, mechanical watches are in vogue and it's easier for us to produce the same."

The production of yet another base calibre has already started at La Chaux-de-Fonds. By September, Hoffmann would be ready for another launch of a "high-end, never-seen-before complication". ○