

A DECADE TO CELEBRATE

Revolution travels to Neuchâtel to celebrate Hautlence’s 10th anniversary and meet the brand’s new ambassador and creative partner, Eric Cantona.

by **sharon benassuli**

Ten years might seem like a short period of time, but for the Neuchâtel-based brand Hautlence, a decade is something to celebrate and a true milestone to praise. Hautlence has experienced and learned much more than most would have in 10 years.

Launched in 2004 by Guillaume Tetu and a small group of friends, Hautlence desired to reinvent the traditional display of time by working with new dial architectures, original case shapes, high-tech materials and movements crafted as mechanical works of art. This innovative and modern spirit led the brand to success and turned the watch world on its head. However, like many, the brand struggled through the economic crisis of 2008, but thanks to investment by Georges-Henri Meylan (former CEO of Audemars Piguet) and his investment company, MELB Holding, the brand was to take off in a new and exciting direction in 2012.

After two years of restructuring and rebranding, Hautlence decided to celebrate its first 10-year anniversary in style with a party in Neuchâtel. All Hautlence and MELB Holding employees were present, as well as VIP guests and over 50 members of the press, who all came to honor the brand’s courage, vision and astounding recovery.

The Early Days

The first Hautlence prototype, the HLO4, was shown at BaselWorld 2004 at a Starbucks coffee shop—an unusual decision for an unknown watch company, but one that got the press and crowds queuing up to grab a coffee while meeting the new brand and its enthusiastic founders.

The HLO4 didn’t feature a dial and showcased instead a plate directly engraved in the mass. Powered by an in-house manual-

winding movement, the HLO4 displayed jumping hours, retrograde minutes and trailing seconds through a sapphire crystal that stood as an intermediate dial with applied hours and minutes. The fact that Hautlence worked so hard on creating its own caliber rather than seeking outside help was a decision that was widely appreciated by watch connoisseurs, and the HLO4’s unusual yet beautiful design set the brand on the path to success right from the start.

The acclaim of the HLO4 prototype led to several other series, such as the HLO6 presented in 2005; the HLs sports collection, inspired by the HL caliber and launched in 2007; and the HLq models, featuring a round caliber with a date function, unveiled in 2009.

Creating the Brand Identity

After the acquisition, Meylan and MELB Holding’s CEO Bill Muirhead worked closely with Tetu to restructure the brand. Prices were drastically reduced, collections were redesigned, and strategies were rethought to put Hautlence back on track.

“When we arrived, there was a very strong identity around the shape of the watch,” shares Muirhead. “Over the months working with Guillaume, I realized that he was very much a product guy and that the company was very much a product company rather than a brand.” Muirhead and Tetu heavily brainstormed on ways to create a brand identity around the company, once coming across an old Harley-Davidson video that featured the tagline “We believe the machine you sit on can tell the world exactly where you stand, we don’t care what everyone else believes.” From this, they came up with the Hautlence



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Georges-Henri Meylan discussing new designs with Guillaume Tetu; the first Hautlence prototype, the HLO4; Guillaume Tetu examining an Hautlence movement.





The Invictus Morphos Limited Edition
by Eric Cantona

Gentlemen Rebels Club—a term to describe owners of the brand’s unconventional timepieces—a new marketing campaign called *Cross The Line* and an ambassador to help communicate the message.

“The Gentlemen Rebels Club is a way for the brand to be identified by more than simply its product. It was really important for us to clarify our message. We speak to people, not just to collectors,” explains Tetu. The *Cross The Line* marketing campaign’s role is to invite watch lovers into the world of Hautlence, potentially becoming part of the group of lucky owners, or as the brand would say, the Gentlemen Rebels.

The Ideal Ambassador

Tetu and Muirhead thought about the ideal ambassador, one who would be the perfect face of the brand and a true Gentlemen Rebel. That’s when Tetu thought about Eric Cantona, former professional soccer player, actor, painter and avid collector of modern art.

“This partnership is not about football and it’s not about being simply a man with an image. It’s about passion—a common passion to put a real project together,” comments Muirhead, explaining that Cantona’s partnership will not only be featured in the *Cross The Line*

campaign but will also involve the co-creation of several Hautlence watches.

Wings of a Butterfly

The first timepiece to be co-designed with Eric Cantona is the Invictus Morphos Limited Edition, which also happens to be Hautlence’s first chronograph. This new chronograph finds its home in the brand’s Signature collection—a line featuring Hautlence’s daring designs at more affordable price points and powered by outsourced movements.

The Invictus Morphos Limited Edition gets its name from the Morphos butterfly, whose wings are stunningly portrayed on the dial. Printed in black on blue mother-of-pearl, the wings glow thanks to a coat of blue luminescent substance placed behind the pattern. The poetic connotation of the butterfly’s wings brings a softer side to the manly and bold designs that we have come to know and love from Hautlence.

“When we started working on the first sketches with our creative team and Eric Cantona, Eric was very sensitive to the color blue, a very deep blue. He mentioned a blue butterfly called *Morphos*, which symbolizes many things—ephemera, purity of the color blue, the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Bill Muirhead, Georges-Henri
Meylan and Guillaume Tetu;
Eric Cantona sketching designs
for the new watch; the Hautlence
10th anniversary event held in
Neuchâtel.



freedom of a butterfly,” says Tetu, adding that the main idea behind the watch was to express the passage of time through a skeletonized movement, representing death, and the butterfly, symbolizing ephemera.

Limited to 250 pieces, the watch is powered by a skeletonized Dubois Dépraz chronograph movement on an automatic Soprod A10 base movement and features hours, minutes, small seconds and a date. Crafted out of grade 2 titanium and steel, this timepiece displays Eric Cantona’s fingerprint and signature on its caseback.

Cross the Line World Tour

As part of the 10th anniversary celebrations, Hautlence and Cantona put together an exhibition presenting the brand’s history and watches next to Cantona’s private street art collection, which he has been

accumulating for several years. “Eric has been collecting art since the age of 22,” comments Tetu, adding that the first salary he ever made playing football was invested in art.

First inaugurated in Neuchâtel and dubbed *Cross The Line World Tour*, the exhibition features rare pieces of art made by Banksy, Blek Le Rat, JR, Jef Aerosol, Jonone, Invader and Shepard Fairey. After being showcased in Neuchâtel, the exhibition will travel the world to Singapore, Hong Kong and many other destinations in 2015.

“Street art was considered for a very long time as the illegitimate child of art, similarly to Hautlence, which at its beginnings, was perceived as the illegitimate child of watchmaking—too creative, too weird and too different,” concludes Tetu with a smile. Something tells us that this first decade is just a short chapter in the Hautlence adventures to come. ★