

Sir Jackie Stewart: the ambassador

In 2008 Sir Jackie Stewart celebrated his 40th anniversary as a brand ambassador for the Rolex company. Few commercial relationships last more than a few years, but Stewart's has endured for four decades.

As Sir Jackie Stewart says himself, he has been married to the same woman for 47 years and to his sponsors for only slightly less time. In Rolex's case, only four years less. Almost every one of his relationships has endured since the 1960s, but none so enduringly as with Rolex. He feels so secure with them and they with him that he says he has signed his contract for many years without even reading it.

Stewart is hugely proud of his relationship with Rolex. Rolex doesn't have many ambassadors. There is Arnold Palmer, Roger Penske, Jean Claude Killy and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, to name most of them. Being a Rolex ambassador is very special and many of the relationships go back as long as Stewart's.

It all started in May 1966 when Stewart bought his first Rolex in Texas on his way home from the Indianapolis 500. He bought it with his Indianapolis winnings and it was one of the first signs that he was starting to make it as a racing driver. He remembers: "It was a gold day date with a president bracelet which was pretty fancy for me to buy in those days. But the Rolex was a symbol of me thinking that I have got enough money to buy something this exclusive." He remembers declaring it to customs on his return to Britain.

The first years of his racing career had been spent virtually penniless, clawing his way to the top, and he couldn't even afford to run a road car. The purchase of the Rolex marked the fact that those days were over. By 1968 he had emerged as Britain's top driver and one of the top five in the world. He started winning a few races in a Matra Ford driving for Ken Tyrrell. Out of the blue Rolex's Andre Heiniger approached him. He remembers: "He wanted to see if I would consider allowing them to use my photograph and likeness." Heiniger had also made the same calls to golfer, Arnold Palmer and Olympic skier, Jean-Claude Killy.

Stewart is not even sure how they knew he was a Rolex wearer. Equally he has no idea why they have chosen to stick with him all these years, or with Killy and Palmer. The longevity of the relationships is a marketing mystery. But the relevance at the time was clear with three youthful sports stars at the top of their game. The relevance now is more doubtful as all are in their early to late 60s and appeal to an entirely different demographic than they did then. In addition these stars have not been replaced. Rolex has stuck to the original three.

In reality the hiring of Stewart, Killy and Palmer was carefully thought through and Rolex believed the three represented the cream of sportsmen of that era. Andre Heiniger also believed that all three would endure. It was a coincidence that the three were managed by sports agent, Mark McCormack's IMG organisation.

McCormack had the same tastes as Rolex. Arnold Palmer was then at the peak of his golf prowess and Killy won three Olympic golds that year. Stewart was about to annex three world championships.

Apart from McCormack's recommendation, Stewart claims he has no idea why he was picked out by Heiniger at that stage of his career. Then he was 18 months away from his first world championship and indeed there were no guarantees he would win one at all. He says: "It has often baffled me that they chose me that early in my career."

But Andre Heiniger, the director general for 50 years, was no ordinary chief executive and he became a legend in the watch business. Heiniger was tremendously influential over what Rolex has become and even years after his death his influence is still felt through his son Patrick who is now chief executive.

Stewart adds: "I think they think that Arnold Palmer, Jean-Claude Killy and Jackie Stewart are men of a similar culture, who have done whatever it is within their own sports. The dignity of

their sports is important as Rolex are heavily into the dignity of the watch, etc. And I think it is a people relationship with the company that is important. They are very choosy who they use in advertising. They use Kiri Te Kanawa at the moment, who they see to be the same type of person. Sailors and mountaineers are also popular."

But it is more than that. It is a market phenomenon that Rolex considered a 28-year-old Jackie Stewart at the start of his winning period in 1968 an asset, and still does at the age of 70 when he has been there and done everything. Stewart says appropriately: "They see it as timeless. Timing is everything in life."

But the longevity of the relationship is still a mystery. When Stewart bought his first Rolex he was a young man buying a high value product and then a young endorser of the product. Now he is an older man who connects with an older audience. It is a totally changed demographic and not as if Rolex has replaced him at the other end of the demographic.

Stewart says: "Rolex has not changed. You can give me all sorts of excuses for wearing another watch, but if you wear a Rolex, whether it is a stainless steel GMT master, which I wear a lot of, or whether you wear a platinum day date, it is a watch that everyone looks at and thinks it is a quality statement."

Stewart believes that the longevity goes even deeper than that: "With Rolex it is not just a question of winning, it is being successful because a winner can always be beaten. But if you are successful you rise above winning or losing. So maybe they think if I had behaved badly or if I had not been successful as I had developed as a person...it is as simple as that."

Fortunately for Rolex none of its ambassadors has ever behaved badly and that is a reason it would never hire a David Beckham. And it could also be a reason why it has not replaced its veteran endorsers with younger sportsmen.

Stewart says: "There have been a lot of racing drivers from my period and after. They were advertising watches in 1927. I think that is the great thing about Rolex; no one is bigger than the brand."

Stewart can't remember, but it appears Rolex paid him something like US\$10,000 in that first year and used a picture of him at the Monaco Grand Prix in the 1986 Matra-Ford going down the hill in Casino Square to the Mirabeau. From then until now he renewed the contract every five years. He describes the pay at the time as: "A reasonable amount of money."

It was an interesting agreement and he had to do very little except lend his name to the brand. In that first year, they perhaps ran three advertisements. Stewart says: "Rolex are famous for not overdoing their relationship of any of their people."

Stewart also recognised that the brand relationship has been two way and that Rolex has rubbed off well on the 'Jackie Stewart' brand, as he says: "They have also been good value for me because of my brand association, which is something that I have guarded very jealously."

Stewart says there is no formal time commitment to Rolex. He says the company simply invites him to a series of events during the year. He says: "They say to me, would you like to come to the opening of this, you would be suitable to attend that." It is the most unstructured relationship he has. He says he occasionally has to decline invitations because of prior commitments. For example in 2004, one clashed with the Goodwood revival, another with the British Open golf at Troon. Both events he deeply regretted missing out on. For him, working for Rolex is a pleasurable event, as he says: "They wanted me to play golf at Troon just before the British Open with some of their customers and there was a clash of dates. They know I would have loved to have played at Troon just prior to the Open. But that is not something that you would find Rolex putting muscle on you for."

It is a remarkable relationship, and Stewart repays the latitude he is allowed under the contract many times. He makes all the heritage of his career available to use. He says: "I did

an advert with David Bailey that was in the Goodwood programme because it was 40 years since I sat in a single-seater for the very first time at Goodwood with Ken Tyrrell and John Cooper along with Bruce McLaren. They used a picture of me in the Tyrrell, just a mirror shot by David Bailey of my face sitting in the Tyrrell. They will use that for other things but they would not use that blandly, just in the appropriate magazines. It is very soft."

Amazingly Stewart says the relationship has not moved with the times. He says it carries on exactly as it was 40 years ago. Stewart says the relationship's core is just that people now know that he wears a Rolex. He says: "For a long time there were pictures of me wearing my gold Rolex in my Formula One uniform taken in Kyalami. But it was just a very casual picture that was used by Rolex outlets and jewellers' shops, just sitting on the counter. It was just a gloss picture of Jackie Stewart wearing a Rolex."

That somewhat famous gold Rolex, to his regret, has now been lost due to his insistence of removing his watch before entering a race car. Stewart never wore a watch when racing because of safety. He is aware that some current drivers wear watches when racing but says it is dangerous. He explains: "I never wore a watch racing on safety grounds. Some of the drivers do wear watches, which is not correct. The biggest risk of wearing a watch, and it sounds gruesome, it is called being de-gloved, and if something catches on the watch and it goes that way it takes all the skin off the back of your hands. That does not grow back and the palm is very difficult as well."

Stewart also declines to wear a bracelet with his blood group and never wore a ring. Astonishingly, he says that the little details in safety are now routinely ignored in Formula One, particularly drivers wearing watches.

Nowadays Stewart's contract is renewed every three or five years. His phonecall with Andre Heiniger's son, Patrick, has become almost routine: "When it comes up for renewal, I either get a call from Patrick saying, 'well Jackie, you know the contract will end this year, I suppose that we ought to do it again hadn't we?'"

It is one of Stewart's most personal relationships and it has never gone through his agency. Stewart says he doesn't actually know what his obligations are under the contract because he claims he hasn't read it in a very long time. He simply says: "It is not like that at all. It is a gentlemen's agreement."

A very lucrative gentlemen's agreement, as by all accounts it pays some US\$250,000 a year. In 2004, a typical year, his duties included attending the opening of a new Rolex store in London and going to a Monterey historic event at Laguna Seca for a hectic round of social events. He also went to the Daytona 500 where he was the Grand Marshall.

Stewart admits he would probably do all this for nothing. Many a time he is spotted at Silverstone presenting the prizes for an obscure race on a Sunday afternoon for which no one pays him.

When Stewart is gone Rolex will seek a replacement from the world of motor racing, but he cannot see who it might be. As well as suitability there are problems of conflict that didn't exist in 1968. Omega man, Michael Schumacher, could never be a Rolex man, neither could Kimi Räikkönen or Juan Pablo Montoya. Equally Stewart believes that Palmer and Killy will also be difficult to replace. And this is probably the answer as to why Rolex has kept the three men on. Replacement sportsmen are incredibly difficult to recruit when an association is designed to last a lifetime.

Stewart says that Rolex's long-term thinking is highly compatible to his own thought processes, as he explains: "I have always been a long-term thinker about relationships. I never left Ken Tyrrell, from 1964 to 1973 when I retired. I was under contract to Ford until the end of 2004. With Moët & Chandon I have had a relationship with them from 1969, so these are all long-term relationships. I have been married to Helen since 1962, what I am saying is long-term."

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