



# **A Rolex that ‘ticks’? It might not be fake – it might be seriously valuable**

The Rolex Tru-Beat is a sought-after vintage watch that ticks like a quartz timepiece. And that's entirely the point...

**By Adrian Hailwood**

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Image courtesy of Phillips

A seconds hand that ticks once per second is instinctively associated with quartz watches rather than mechanical and, for most people, Rolex is all about mechanical. That's why popular wisdom dictates that the giveaway sign of a fake Rolex is that it “tick tocks”. Which is strange because, in fact, even the cheapest forgeries now have mechanical movements and Rolex itself produced ticking quartz watches in the form of the Oysterquartz line between 1997 and 2003.

But what about a mechanical Rolex that ticks like a quartz? Weird as it sounds, it does exist.

Until their replacement by quartz and then atomic clocks, the best timekeepers were long-case pendulum clocks. Their stability and simple construction meant that they could be regulated to remarkable levels of precision and, of course, the second hand ticked once per second. As time became portable in the form of pocket watches, the use of balance springs increased the frequency of the ticking, which was desirable: the higher the frequency, the more resistant the watch was to knocks and shocks.



A Rolex Tru-Beat ref 6556 sold for CHF 28,750 by Phillips auction house in 2020

Image courtesy of Phillips

Maybe in a tribute to these early, super-accurate regulators, the end of the 18th century saw pocket watches arrive with mechanisms designed to mimic the once-per-second tick – known as “dead-beat seconds”. Examples exist from Breguet, Le Roy, Lepine and others, but there is no evidence that it was done for anything other than the challenge of doing so. Breguet incorporated this complication into watch no 160, the infamous and extraordinarily complex “Marie Antoinette”.

Fast forward to the 1950s and the race to stand out in the post-war wristwatch market led to a host of innovations. Just as it produced the Milgauss to appeal to the engineering market, Rolex resurrected the idea of a “dead-beat” seconds watch for the medical market with reference 6556. Launched in 1954, Rolex named it the Tru-Beat (“Dead-Beat” would have been rather bad taste for medics) and argued that it made taking pulses or counting breathing rates easier.



The calibre 1040 inside the Rolex Tru-Beat sold by Phillips auction house

Image courtesy of Phillips

The movement, calibre 1040, was a 1030 with an extra module on top to produce the one-second tick. Problems with reliability, difficulty of servicing and a lack of interest from the target market meant that the Tru-Beat's production was short-lived. Of the few that were sold, many reverted to a sweeping motion as exasperated watchmakers downgraded the movement to the more dependable calibre 1030, meaning that an all-original one is now a collector's prize. The example pictured above, auctioned by Phillips in 2020, fetched CHF 28,750 (approximately £22,790); in 2015, Phillips sold a Tru-Beat that had the extra cachet of having been retailed by Tiffany & Co, which went for CHF 37,500 (approximately £29,725).

So, if someone shows you an old Rolex that they dismiss as a blatant fake for the way the seconds hand moves, look closer. If you see “Tru-Beat” on the dial, you may have uncovered a gem.

**CONDÉ NAST BRITAIN**