



# How Ebel became the chronograph's secret saviour

Since the once-thriving, venerable Swiss watch brand Ebel suffered a series of setbacks in the 1980s, its fortunes have been revived by a return to more moderate, subtle tastes. Today, its sleek 1995 chronograph – the 1911, Le Modulor – is considered a modern classic

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If ever there was a watch brand deserving of rapprochement, it is Ebel. Founded in 1911 in La Chaux-De-Fonds, Switzerland, its canny owners successfully navigated the turbulent seas of the watch market for more than 80 years, until a change of ownership and a change in fashion knocked them off course. Ebel survived the Second World War as one of the suppliers of ATP watches to the British Army. The brand embraced quartz, becoming the supplier of high-end movements to Cartier, among others, and yet its prescient leadership also foresaw the return of mechanical watchmaking, working with Zenith to resurrect the [El Primero](#) for their 1982 Sport Classic Chrono line. This watch made Ebel a hit in the 1980s, gracing Sonny Crockett's wrist in *Miami Vice*, the rolled-back suit cuffs ensuring plenty of screen time.

Ebel was not complacent. Once Rolex adopted the El Primero for their [Daytona](#), it knew its movement supply was liable to get squeezed. For this reason, it looked to develop its own movement. The brand settled on Calibre 1340, the first automatic movement created by Lemania in 1970. This was another movement in need of resuscitation, as it had been supplanted by the 5100 series, which was cheaper to produce. After the redesign and improvement of a number of elements, this became Ebel Calibre 137.

In the background, other changes were afoot. Ebel was sold to Investcorp, a Bahrainian investment company and while it became stablemates with its movement supplier, Lemania, along with Breguet and Chaumet, a period of stagnation followed. In the wider world, fashions were changing and watches were becoming bigger and bulkier in design. The Investcorp management failed to respond to this and, in 1995, the Ebel 1911, Le Modulor (a reference to the modular nature of the chronograph construction) was launched.

The design was too sleek and too elegant to compete with the likes of Breitling, IWC and Panerai. Ebel's fortunes faltered and it was sold in 1999 to LVMH. As it already owned Zenith and TAG Heuer, LVMH didn't need another mechanical sports watch brand and so Ebel was pushed into a quartz ladies' niche. Four years later, LVMH offloaded Ebel to the Movado group, who had no such qualms about macho watches. Movado took the Ebel 1911 case design, pumped it up to 44.5mm and relaunched it as the BTR ("back to roots") collection.

Now that case sizes have moved back from the ludicrous to the reasonable, it is worth taking a look at the 1911, Le Modulor. Not housing the El Primero increases the affordability, while reducing servicing costs, and the overall look is the same. The movement is largely the same as the Calibre 582 used by Breguet in its Type XX, so you know you're getting quality.

The Ebel Sports Wave and 1911 models are finally being recognised as classics, so why not bag yourself the best value chronograph of the range? Prices for stainless steel range from £1,500 to £2,000 from a dealer – even less if you try your luck at auction – leaving more money in your pocket for that second-hand Ferrari Testarossa to complete the 1980s vibe.