



# How Rolex's diminutive 'Piccolino' proved smaller could be better

First released in the 1930s and then reissued in the 1950s, the Rolex Explorer Ref 3055 was vaunted as the smallest chronograph in the world, at just 30mm across. It's not a claim you can imagine watchmakers making today, but this little watch, nicknamed the 'Piccolino', had an immense impact

**By Adrian Hailwood**

20 September 2021



© Christie's Images Limited 2021

The size of the watch on your wrist is a perennial subject for debate. Fashions change, diameters rise and fall and what was considered a “statement piece” ten years ago may be dismissed as vulgar now. Add to this the watch-gender discussion – ie should watches be sold as “ladies” and “men’s” or just described by dimensions? – and you can see that a simple quest for the perfect watch size is anything but.

Cases are certainly shrinking and the return of the [Rolex Explorer](#) to a unisex-friendly 36mm was widely applauded by fans of both vintage and contemporary watches. There is a limit, though: it is highly unlikely we will see a return to the dimensions of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when men’s watches, even military “tool” watches, could be found around the 30mm mark. This is a shame, as it means one of Rolex’s most interesting chronographs is more likely to be found in a safe than on a wrist.

**One of Rolex’s most interesting chronographs is more likely to be found in a safe than on a wrist**

Rolex's reference 3055 (not to be confused with the venerable Day-Date movement of the same number) is a diminutive chronograph first produced in the 1930s. With a case diameter of just 30mm, it was vaunted as the smallest chronograph in the world – not a claim you can imagine a contemporary watch brand striving to make! At this time, Rolex were not producing their own chronograph movements and so their record was based on the tiny movement inside the watch, a movement supplied by those masters of all things chronograph Valjoux.

The Valjoux 96 calibre was produced between 1936 and 1966 and measured only 23.35mm across, easily small enough for Rolex to achieve their record. Although in production for 30 years, less than 4,000 movements were made in total across all the brands Valjoux supplied, making this little gem a rare thing.

Unsurprisingly dubbed “Piccolino” by Italian collectors, the Ref 3055 had two leases of life, first in the late 1930s and a relaunch in the 1950s. The only major differences between them were a redesign of the chronograph pushers from “olive” shape to rectangular, the crown changing from a domed to flat profile and the sub-dials shrinking a little. Estimates suggest the majority of these chronographs were cased in stainless steel and that only 200 of these miniature marvels were produced in yellow gold and a mere 20 in rose gold. Contemporary pricing set the retail value of the gold 3055 above that of a much larger gold chronograph pocket watch, showing the value Rolex placed on this feat of miniaturisation. You might expect such a tiny watch to be reserved for dress wear, tucked beneath a well-pressed cuff. A trawl through the photo archives turns up none other than Enzo Ferrari wearing one and not with a dinner suit either. Posing with drivers in trademark rolled-up sleeves, his brawny wrist can be seen clearly and on it the 3055 in gold.

**Only 200 of these miniature marvels were produced in yellow gold and a mere 20 in rose gold**

If you are looking to add a 3055 to your collection originality is everything. The early 1930s versions go for more than the 1950s, but a clean, unrestored dial is as important as age. The rarer gold versions make more than their yellow gold siblings, but, interestingly, auction prices seemed to peak around ten years ago, when huge watches were still in vogue, before falling back a little. As more modestly sized watches are appearing at retail, now may be the time to snap one up.

**CONDÉ NAST BRITAIN**