



A Commando performance / Breitling and Norton motorcycles get their partnership off to a flier with a matching chrono and bike

By Hugh Francis-Anderson / Photographs by James McNaught



There's a certain refined masculinity to the Norton Commando 961. Its elongated frame, delicately formed tank and café-racer inspired saddle make it nothing but inviting. In silhouette it exudes nostalgia for North London's Ace Café in the Fifties and the "Ton-up Boys" in perpetual pursuit of 100mph. Yet while at a quick glance the cycle looks wholly classic, upon closer inspection you'll find a plethora of high-performance parts: full Brembo brake system, fully adjustable Ohlins front and rear suspension, and an in-house developed parallel-twin 961cc engine thumping out 72bhp. And it's a sentiment that rings true of Breitling, too; where historic design cues and modernity merge in seamless unity, at least ever since the accession of Georges Kern as CEO.

The match between Breitling and Norton, announced in February last year, was one of the first new deals brought in by Kern. It came as something of a surprise given Norton's pre-existing relationship with Bremont (the two had only recently launched a watch together, the Norton V4/RR), timing that seems all the odder when you consider it has taken Breitling more than a year to follow up the initial announcement with a watch.

Still, there can be no argument that in jumping on as pillion, Breitling has backed a burgeoning trend of activity between bikers and watchmakers, in particular with the more heritage aspect of the motorcycle world. Zenith was one of the first, partnering with the classic and custom motorcycle event, The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride. Baume & Mercier has found a fruitful relationship with Indian Motorcycles; Bell & Ross commissioned East Sussex-based Harley Davidson custom shop Shaw Speed & Custom to create the Nascade Racer and the B-Rocket; while Bucherer recently grabbed the headlines when it, with Harley-Davidson, commissioned the world's most expensive motorcycle — the Blue Edition costing CHF1,888m (£1,433m).

With a firmly established link to both aviation and ocean-going timepieces, Breitling's partnership with Norton comes at a time when □



Opposite: Breitling's Premier B01 Chronograph 42 Norton Limited Edition
Above and below: the Norton Breitling Sport Commando 961 motorcycle



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the brand is pursuing terrestrial adventure with haste. "One of our aims is to take Breitling beyond being known mainly for its links with aviation and back to its roots as a maker of watches for use on land and sea, as well as in the air," says Kern. "Both companies have reputations for products with an incredible 'cool factor'. It's easy to imagine someone riding by on a Norton motorcycle wearing a classic Breitling: a perfect combination of aspirational, statement-making brands."

An early 20th century British motorcycle pioneer founded in 1898, Norton Motorcycles became perhaps most famed for "The Unapproachable Norton Dominator" that won 10 Isle of Man Senior TT races throughout the inter-war period. During WWII, Norton produced around 100,000 machines for the British Army, accounting for almost a quarter of all British military bikes, and after the war swiftly returned to winning ways at the TT, taking victory from 1947 to 1954.

The Commando was launched in 1968 and became an unexpected success (given its relatively humble mechanical underpinnings), remaining in production until the late Seventies, when Norton entered a period of turbulent governance that would last, on and off, until the turn of the millennium. Stuart Garner, the company's current owner and CEO, resurrected the Norton name in 2008 and set about restoring it to its former glory, buying the grandiose Donington Hall for its global headquarters in early 2013. Today, not unlike many a watch company, it offers a lifestyle of opulence and luxury to run alongside its hand-built English machines, trading heavily on its illustrious and pre-eminent past.

Despite the similarities in the two companies' histories — founded within a decade of each other, finding success early in the 20th century, distinguished suppliers to the British military, basking in golden eras during the Sixties and Seventies before becoming beset by corporate struggles — the key for both brands is about looking to the future. And both seem to have the same mission of creating a luxury brand with heritage at its heart that speaks to a wider audience than nostalgia alone can support.

"I've always said the key to a company's success is to let the brand be the brand," says Garner. "This has been essential both at Norton and Breitling. We haven't tried to change the nature of our brands or deny their histories. In fact, we revel in those histories and take inspirations from them while focusing on the future." □

At pains to emphasise the effortless nature of the partnership, Kern agrees. "We were looking for a cool brand with an interesting history and Norton just seemed right. Both companies are innovative, entrepreneurial and have powerful legacies," he says. "We are looking ahead to what we at Breitling call 'our legendary future'."

After a bit of a wait, the first of many promised collaborations is here in the Breitling Premier B01 Chronograph 42 Norton Edition, priced at £6,700. Stylistically, the watch toes the line between modern chronograph and heritage timepiece — the purpose of the Premier Collection when launched last year. In hindsight, it is obvious Breitling needed to wait for the Premier to appear before really exploring its land-based affiliations, and the standard Premier B01 Chronograph 42 has proved a versatile base upon which to add bespoke elements. There is also a Premier dedicated to Breitling's partnership with Bentley, boasting a racing green dial and consigning the oversized knurled bezels of the last 16 years to the history books.

Inspired by the spirit of the Forties, and as an ode to the first "fashionable" collection released by the brand, the models in the Premier collection all draw inspiration from the past, although in truth they bear greater resemblance to the panda-dialed chronographs of the late Sixties. Kern claims "these watches have been created with a focus on style that beautifully complements their purpose", and the B01 Norton Edition does just that: an opulent, dressy take on the already well-mannered Premier.

As an added bonus, the gilt-edged numerals and hands combine with the black dial to echo Norton's John Player Special-sponsored racing livery last seen in 1992. It's equipped with the Breitling Manufacture Calibre 01, visible through the transparent case back, which is adorned with an inscription of the Norton logo and also engraved on a small plate on the left side of the case. A brown raw leather strap adds just enough ruggedness back into the mix for the chronograph to feel at home on my side through Thetford Forest.

It makes sense too that Norton Motorcycles has returned the honour, celebrating the partnership with its own limited-edition release — a tweaked version of the Commando 961 named the Norton Breitling Sport, featuring bespoke paint trim in black, silver and gold. Exactly 77 numbered examples will be manufactured, retailing at £17,950. *



"It's easy to imagine someone riding by on a Norton wearing a classic Breitling" with Norton's logo on the B01's 42mm case and 'B's' embellishing the Commando 961 Sport, the Breitling and Norton partnership comes to life

