

Vintage Fantasy

5-4-8

League

New Series: We give you \$8,000, you choose five watches. It's 5-4-8.

Photographs by Ralf Beinenz, David Devos and Jeff Stein

BY PHILLIP GOODLOE

If you had a budget of \$8,000 to buy five watches, what would you buy?

That's the question we have asked collector Jeff Stein this month. His responses kick off a new series in *International Watch* that offers a specific, and we think very instructive, approach to collecting. Rather than considering specific categories or brands of watches (vintage, modern, complicated or classic) this series will

approach the subject from a new perspective—giving you a fixed budget to create a collection of five watches.

We've set a few ground rules in this Vintage Fantasy League. The most important rule is that our collector will own these five watches—and only these five watches—for a period of five years. At the end of that time, he or she will return them to us. No need to think about investment poten-

tial or whether they will triple in value or become worthless. We will reclaim them, or perhaps bury them, at the end of five years.

In addition, these choices will not be in the vault or in display cases. They are to be worn and enjoyed. Finally, the collector can buy them in whatever condition desired, whether new old stock, excellent or "beater." Then, in 2012, they will be returned, with no questions asked.

Why \$8,000?

In case you are wondering, we chose the \$8,000 number very carefully.

You can buy five watches for \$1,600 each; you can spend \$5,000 on your crown jewel, and an average of \$750 for the other four; you can even press higher, by spending \$6,000 on the crown jewel, \$1,000 on the number-two choice, and \$333 on the remaining three. We believe that the \$8,000 budget will allow the selection of five watches that will cover a nice cross-section of the watches that are of interest to a wide range of our readers.

So if you are interested in \$10,000 or \$100,000 watches, this vintage fantasy league may not work for you. (In future issues, we may change the budget to accommodate those with larger or smaller budgets.)

Featured Collector: Jeff Stein

The idea for this series of interviews began with a discussion held several months ago on a Heuer discussion forum at www.chronocentric.com. Accordingly, it is fitting that we launch this series with Jeff Stein, the operator of this site. Stein collects vintage chronographs, focusing primarily on the pre-TAG Heuer chrono-

graphs from the 1930s through the mid-1980s. His collection currently includes chronographs from approximately twenty different brands, though the majority are Heuers.

iW: We understand that you have been playing with this “Five for Eight” puzzle for several months now. How did this question first arise and why with these two numbers?

Stein: A friend at the office has been interested in my collecting habits, and he told me that he wanted to start a collection of vintage chronographs for himself. We began to talk about the ideal size of this “collection” (up to five watches) and his budget (around \$1,500 per watch), and soon we had posted messages on a couple of discussion forums seeking recommendations for five watches for \$8,000. It was interesting that there was consensus on two or three of the “icons” (Omega Speedmaster and Heuer Carrera), but many diverging opinions as we got further down the “Top Five” list.



We launch this series with Jeff Stein, operator of OnTheDash.com and chronocentric.com. Stein, an Atlanta-based lawyer, collects vintage chronographs and has written a price guide for Heuer chronographs.

iW: So let's see how you begin to solve this puzzle. Tell us about your approach and whether you can find a way to be happy with only five chronographs?

Stein: I've been preparing for this conversation and I have an approach: I will want five vintage chronographs; they will represent five brands and be powered by five different movements. We will cover the period from around 1950 through the mid-1980's. And, yes, I think that I could be happy owning only these five chronographs. →

Heuer Autavia GMT

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iW: Well, tell us about your first selection. What will you select in Round One of our fantasy draft?

Stein: My first selection will be the GMT version of the Heuer Autavia. Heuer Autavias, made from 1962 through the mid-1980s, are the heart of my collection, and I find the GMT function (which uses a rotating “Pepsi” bezel) particularly useful, especially when I am traveling or when members of my family are abroad.

The Cal 14 automatic movement powers this chronograph, so it stems from the first line of automatic chronographs, introduced in 1969. The “Pepsi” bezel also gives us some color to start the collection. We should be able to find a nice one, on the original bracelet, with a budget of around \$2,000. Yes, my first choice must be an Autavia—I have lots of different models in my collection, but for me, it all started with the Autavias.

iW: What’s second on your list?

Stein: My next choice will be a little more conventional for vintage collectors: an Omega Speedmaster, from around 1968. The Speedmaster is the consensus “icon,” the chronograph most col-

lectors would have if they could only have one. I’ll save a few dollars by going with the 861 movement rather than the fabled (and more expensive) 321 movement. I’m confident that we will be able to find a nice sample, on a bracelet, in the \$1,400 range.

iW: So you have a Heuer and an Omega. What will you have battling third in your lineup?

Stein: Next up will be the Sinn 156. In terms of the brands in my

collection, Sinn is currently my second favorite and the 156 is one of the stars of their lineup. The Sinn 156 uses the same huge case and rotating bezel as the Heuer Bundeswehr chronograph, but the Sinn is powered by the Lemania 5100 movement (rather than Heuer’s Valjoux 230). This is a rugged watch; the minute hand of the chrono is mounted on the center pinion, and the chronograph is very easy to read. This model has day/date, so I’ll

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Omega Speedmaster



Sinn 156

3

wear this one when I think that will be useful.

Since this may end up as my daily wearer, I'll choose one in average to good condition. The budget for this piece can be set at around \$1,200.

iW: So you have made your first three selections, and you have spent only \$4,600. Let me guess that you have been saving your money for something big. Tell us about watch number four.

Stein: Yes, the 861-powered Speedmaster and Sinn 156 have allowed us to save a few dollars, and watch number four will use up more than half of what we have saved. We'll be going with a manual-wind Breitling Cosmonaute. We're going to spend around \$2,400 for this one. With this budget, we won't be able to afford the early black-on-black version or the nicest of the later ones, but this should be a good budget for a nice sample, on a leather strap. We'll save a few more dollars by choosing the leather strap, rather than the bracelet; I'm fine with this, as most of the 1960's era Breitlings were shipped with the leather strap.

The Cosmonaute has a true 24-hour indication, and is powered

by the Venus 178 movement. I enjoy 24-hour chronographs and I'm into the history of the early U. S. space flights, so this Cosmonaute addresses two items on my wish-list. The Cosmonaute was the first chronograph worn in space, in May 1962.

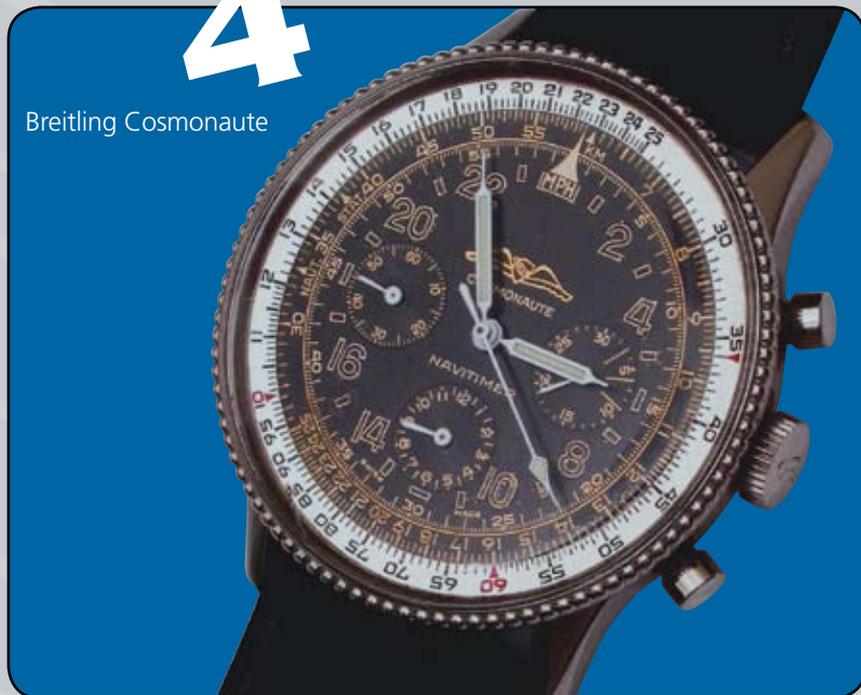
iW: Well, we may have a bit of tough news for you now. You have picked four watches that cost a total of \$7,000, so you have only \$1,000 remaining. Tell us what you are going to choose with these remaining dollars.

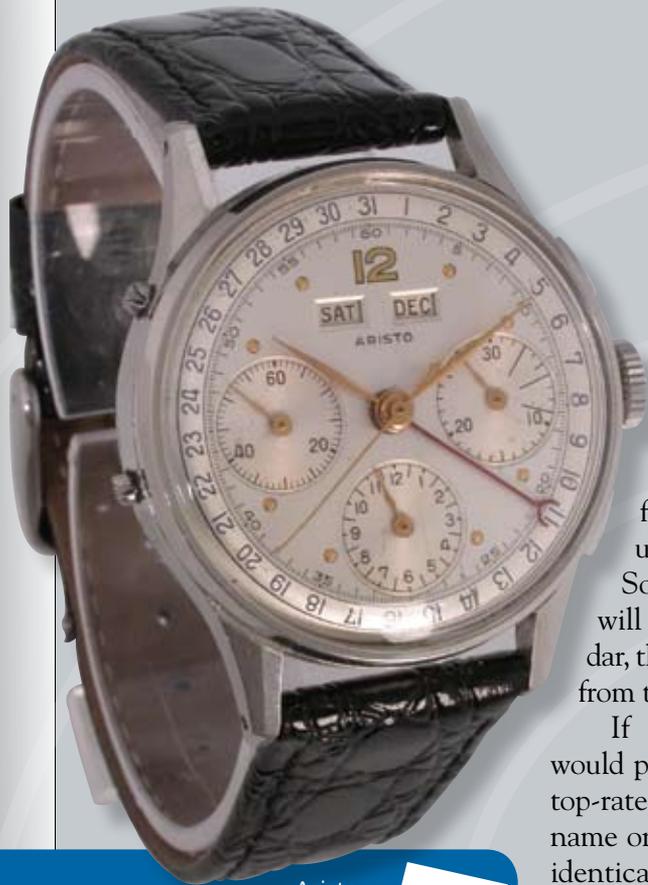
Stein: Actually, this is one of the easier choices and shows one of my



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Breitling Cosmonaute





Aristo

5

favorite strategies. I'm a real enthusiast of what we call the "poor man's Heuers"—watches manufactured by Heuer but sold under other brand names. So my fifth chronograph will be an Aristo, triple-calendar, three-register chronograph, from the 1950s.

If this were a Heuer, we would pay \$2,500 to \$3,000 for a top-rated sample. With the Aristo name on the dial, we will get the identical look for around \$1,000. We also get the same movement, the legendary Valjoux 72c. If we can't find this Aristo day-date-month chronograph, then we can keep our eyes open for other "poor man's" versions, made by Heuer for Zodiac or Clebar. Any of these will give us the look and feel of the Heuer, at a fraction of the price.

iW: So you have made your five selections, and spent the full \$8,000. How would you summarize this collection?

Stein: I have five chronographs, from five brands, with five entirely different movements—Valjoux 72c, Venus 178, Lemania 5100, Omega 861, and the Cal 14. I have a good representation of the different complications—GMT

on the Autavia; day/date on the Sinn; and day-date-month on the Aristo—and we have spanned a 30-year period, from start to finish. Three are on bracelets; two on straps. I could be very happy wearing these five for the next five years.

iW: Now let's hit you with some additional questions, to force you to change the mix of watches in your collection.

We'll start with some good news: We have found an additional \$1,000, so you can upgrade one of your watches. What will you do with the extra \$1,000?

Stein: That's some good news; let's see how we can spend that money. I'm 100 percent happy with the Autavia, the Sinn 156 and the Aristo triple-calendar. So there are two possible upgrades: we can upgrade the Speedmaster from the 861 movement to the 321 movement, or we can upgrade the Breitling Cosmonaute, to the earlier black-on-black dial. If we get really lucky, we can add an original bracelet. Either the 321 Speedy or the early Cosmonaute would be the "trophy" piece of this collection; if forced to choose one, I would spend \$3,400 on a black-on-black Cosmonaute.

iW: Now let's go the other direction. Times are bad, and we need to prune \$1,000 from your original budget. How do you save \$1,000 from these initial choices?

Stein: That's actually easier, and less painful, than you might imagine. Once again, we'll ship out the \$2,400 Breitling Cosmonaute, and this time we will trade down to a \$1,400 chronograph. We can find a nice "non-icon" chronograph for \$1,400. My top choice would be a three-register Abercrombie & Fitch from the early 1950s, made by Heuer and powered by the Valjoux 71. So you are getting the idea. I like the Cosmonaute a lot, but it's using up a lot of the budget, so whether we want to upgrade the collection with a trophy or save some money, the Cosmonaute will be the one I am most likely to switch out.

iW: Looking back at your original five selections, is there anything that might be called a glaring omission? Any regrets that you might want to address, for example, if you were allowed to choose a sixth chronograph?

Stein: Looking at my original five chronographs, and seeing the choices from Heuer, Omega, Sinn and Breitling, some chronograph collectors would suggest that the missing brand is Zenith, and that the logical extension of the col-



Quick way to save \$1,000: If the money gets tight, we'll drop the Breitling Cosmonaute in favor of a three-register Abercrombie & Fitch chronograph.

lection would be with the addition of an El Primero. If you will increase the budget, we can add an El Primero anywhere in the \$1,400 to \$4,000 range. I would probably keep it simple, and go with one of the smaller, earlier El Primeros, from around 1970. We could do that with an extra \$1,500 to \$1,800. With Heuer, Omega, Breitling and Zenith in the line-up, no one could say that we have missed any of the "major" brands of vintage chronographs, at least the Swiss ones. Seiko collectors will remind us that for an additional \$200 to \$400, we can add one of their colorful chronographs.

iW: Is there anything else "missing" from this collection? The same way that Zenith was the

missing brand from your original five watches, is there anything missing, in terms of features or complications, or any era or "look" missing from this collection?

Stein: Looking back over the list, the missing watch might be a more conventional dress watch. There is always the question, "Which one would you wear with a tuxedo?" I would be happy wearing the Aristo as my dressy watch, but some would say that any chronograph is a "tool watch" and would look funny under French cuffs.

Being a "chrono guy" who only wears a tuxedo a couple of times per year, I wouldn't want to spend too much on this dress watch. If you told me that I had to have one non-chronograph,



Give the collection some color. For \$2,500, we can add the legendary Zenith or Movado El Primero; for \$1,000, we get the red, white and blue of the Gallet, and a slide rule ("poor man's Breitling") to boot.

I would probably add an Omega from the 1950s, maybe a Constellation or Seamaster.

iW: OK, now we are going to ask some rapid-fire questions, and get some quick answers. Here's the first one. Your original five are all black and white (except for the red and blue bezel on the Autavia). Make a change to give us some color!

Stein: The easiest way to give the collection some color will be to drop the Sinn (our rugged, every-day watch), and bring in a bright divers' watch—probably a 1970's piece from either Doxa or Favre-Leuba. The Gallet Excel-O-Graph would give us red, white and blue, and a slide rule, for around \$1,000. To add color further up the food chain—I'll drop the black and white Cosmonaute (at \$2,400) and add a big, blue Zenith or Movado El Primero. →



iW: As a variation, now we'll mandate that you must spend at least half of your \$8,000 original budget on one watch. Tell us about your \$4,000 "trophy" watch, and also about the remaining four, that you would buy with a limit of \$4,000?

Stein: With \$4,000 to \$5,000, I would buy one of my three "grail" watches: a "Steve McQueen" Monaco from Heuer (which may end up at \$5,000), a three-register Heuer Carrera, silver dial with black registers (at around \$4,000) or a Lemania 5100-powered Speedmaster, in the 1960's style case. In terms of the other watches in the collection, I will drop down to "beater" versions of the 861 Speedmaster and Sinn 156 (at \$800 to \$1,000 each) and prowl the flea markets for two \$500 watches.

iW: Now let's go the other direction. You've told us about your \$4,000 or \$5,000 "grail" watches, and you've told us about the dressy one that you'll wear with a tuxedo. Which of your five chronographs will you wear to go running or to mow the grass?

Stein: I would be happy with the Sinn 156 as the rough-and-tumble chronograph of the group. This one can be the "beater" of the group, especially if I were able to return it to you at the end of five years. If I couldn't stand to do this to the Sinn, the best choice would be to buy a "beater" at the outset. I'm confident that with a budget of \$400, I can find a rugged three-register chronograph that will be perfect for mowing the grass or timing the morning run. Several

manufacturers produced solid chronographs, powered by the Valjoux 7750 and in an indestructible "sewer plate"-style steel case.

iW: That's been a whirlwind tour of your fantasy collection, but now let's go back to the friend that you mentioned in response to our first question: How has your friend

done with his "5-4-8" collection?

Stein: He has bought three watches and he's enjoying them every day. He's got a mint 861 Speedmaster, a blue and gray El Primero, and an automatic Carrera, from the early 1970's. So he's loving his first three chronographs, and the best news of all is that he's still got \$3,000 remaining for the last two! ☺



Three of the "Grails." If we were forced to spend at least \$4,000 to \$5,000 on one of the watches, any of these three would fill the bill – "Steve McQueen" Monaco, the black-on-white Carrera 12 Dato or the Speedmaster (top) powered by the Lemania 5100.