

EUROPA STAR ARCADE - Silvano Freti - LABORATOIRE DUBOIS: Industrial Gold Standard



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by Serge Maillard

You may not have heard of it, but the Neuchâtel company is the unrivalled leader of pre-market reliability testing for Swiss made watches. Meeting with its director, Silvano Freti.



Silvano Freti

Object: MALLET

“Symbolically, the mallet is the instrument used to test watches, to ‘break’ them. But when we put to the proof watches, if we do break them it’s out of love for watchmaking! And obviously we don’t use actual mallets; we use rigorously controlled protocols.”

Tell us something of Laboratoire Dubois’ history.

The laboratory was founded in 1977 in La Chaux-de-Fonds by Henri Dubois. He is approaching 80 now, and honorary president of the company. I joined the laboratory seven years ago. The company started out in electroplating, conducting chemical analyses and metallographic examinations for subcontractors to the watch industry, such as dial makers. The laboratory subsequently took on reliability testing, which had previously been carried out by the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry. Today we offer a very wide range of services: chemical analysis, materials testing, watch tests and of course reliability testing.

You are particularly known for your Chronofiable® test.

Yes, we test movements with an accelerated ageing cycle. Twenty-one days under this protocol is the equivalent of six months’ wear on the wrist! But let’s be specific: the protocol simulates the effects of wear, not wear itself. Furthermore, we offer many other tests for watchmakers, such as analysing the performance corrosion, shock-resistance, magnetism and water resistance testing. We also conduct various special tests on the functions of the watch and its movement.

With the increasing number of restrictions being imposed, I expect you're not short of work!

Certainly, toxicological analyses connected with regulations such as the European REACH program, and also American and Chinese legislation, are becoming increasingly important. The state of California, for instance, has strict standards about the presence of harmful molecules. We test the components that come into direct contact with the skin, like the straps and bracelets, which are the most likely to cause allergies. Between 10 and 20% of women are allergic to nickel. Watchmakers and suppliers are increasingly alert to this, as the potential for damage to their image is considerable. They may even be denied access to certain markets, and regulators can be particularly zealous about enforcing these regulations when there are commercial advantages at stake.

Do you only test components, or do you also test complete watches?

It is relatively rare that we test a complete watch – although it is the case for diving models, whose standard relates to the complete watch. The latest version of the anti-shock standard will require to test the watch complete with bracelet. The situation will change very quickly.

Do you also perform downstream analyses, in the event that a watch is found to present a damage or a failure?

Yes, we do carry out investigations. For example, clients may ask us to find out why a particular component has failed. I should point out that more and more of our clients conduct simple tests in-house. Our strategy is to offer a wide range of services covering more advanced expertise. So quite often, when an issue is detected customers come to us.

Do watch brands use your tests for PR purposes?

Very seldom. Our reports don't constitute a 'label', like Qualité Fleurier, for example. Those companies that do pass on our reports are looking for technical legitimacy. In some cases, watches have even been put on sale with the Chronofiable® label when they haven't even been tested!

How many people do you have working for you?

There are 35 of us: chemists, engineers, technicians and watchmakers. We have to be flexible and reactive, particularly in the lead-up to the major watch fairs. We have no long-term order book and very little visibility. We often have to juggle our priorities in order to meet our clients' demands in terms of quality and deadlines.

Do you also work with brands from outside Switzerland?

Only for certain services. The Chronofiable® protocol is reserved exclusively for Swiss brands. It's a question of respect for our native soil, for the community we continue to work in today.

Will you offer reliability testing for smartwatches?

We are currently looking into the kinds of services we could offer. But this sector is still in its infancy.

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