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THE SECRET FORMULA FOR BUILDING GREAT

Tattoo Machines

BAVARIAN
CUSTOM IRON
MACHINE
BUILDER,
STEFAN
FISCHER TEL
US ALL ABOUT
HIS PASSION



CTM: Hi Stefan! Tell us a bit about yourself before your involvement in the tattoo industry.

Stefan: I was born in the south of Germany in Munich and have lived here all my life. Before I founded Bavarian Custom Irons and before I started building machines I worked in a few different jobs—even as a kindergarten teacher! However I was never quite satisfied. I have always loved tattoos, getting tattooed and I even started collecting them when I was 16. I reached a point in my life, somewhere around the age of 26, where I recognised it was time to follow my heart. That's when I started tattooing, first at home and later in a studio. I later opened my own studio in a small town called Grafing about 30km from Munich. Only 12,000 people live in my town, so my shop is very special in this small town. A lot of artists visit me in Grafing and are always surprised when they see our little village (laughs)!

CTM: How long you have been building machines and why did you start?

Stefan: I've been building machines since 2006 and began because of my interest in engineering, mechanics and tools.

Coil tattoo machines are fascinating and from the first day I held a machine, I had the wish to build one with soul and that unique, antique style. In the first two years I studied tattoo machines day and night. I had a room in my garage—only four square metres—with all my tools and materials inside, this was the laboratory of the first BCI machines. Sometimes I'd spend so much time there that I didn't know the time or even if it was day or night (laughs)! I experimented with many materials for each part of the machine, especially the frame and coils. Coils are the heart of a machine so choosing the right wire, thickness and of course the perfect coil core material was very difficult. I still use the same materials I discovered in my tiny windowless room!

CTM: In recent years you have become well recognised as a tattoo machine builder, especially in Germany and Europe. How did you make this happen?

Stefan: Thank you! I travelled a lot in the last three years and visited many studios. I did a lot of promotion through magazines and the web, but the most important factor has been the amount of professional tattoo artists using and recommending

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my machines. I get so much positive feedback and have so many artists that respect my work and support me. This is another reason why I love my job so much! Finally I work hard to improve and have reached a point where my machines run stable and seldom require repairs. I offer a lifetime warranty too. My customers appreciate and value the warranty and the service that I provide. I don't think I am the best tattoo machine builder in Europe or Germany. I don't like titles like that. I just do my work, which I love with all my heart and soul. It is rewarding to see the beautiful work by artists from all over the world using my machines.

CTM: Your machines seem to be so powerful but still smooth and soft in the skin. You seem to have a secret formula!

Stefan: Oh yes my friend, I do have a secret formula for my machines ... every full moon I sit naked on a Bavarian mountain and pray to the tattoo Gods to make my machines run like no one else's [laughs]! No, I have no secret formula; I just look for the right materials and take care when building the frames and winding the coils. Over the years I've learned how different spring and coil setups work on the skin. I've also tested many combinations on my own skin and I never stop testing and improving. I'm still learning and still as interested as I was when I started.

CTM: What are your plans for this year and next?

Stefan: My plans for this year are to (hopefully) visit all the conventions I have booked! Then I hope to find time to build new machines including a single coil machine. I have a lot of ideas for new machines I'm just missing the time to release them! Beside the machines, I'm also working on some bulletproof foot switches. We've already produced a prototype and some friends are testing them in their studio. But the new foot switch must survive the final test—I will drive over it with my Volkswagen T4 Van! If the foot switch still works ... we did a good job (laughs), and if it still works three months or more after that it'll go straight into production! Everything is getting better in our factory. I have some great guys who work with me, my wife helps in the office and everything is getting easier. So hopefully I'll have more time for my family in the upcoming months too!

CTM: What's the expectation of reaching other continents like Australasia or America?

Stefan: I have many great artists all over the world who are willing and very interested in supporting me and my tattoo machines. We already have a lot of distributors across Europe, Australia and a few other countries overseas. We have requests from everywhere. I choose my distributors very carefully however, as I don't want to sell to any suppliers who sell to the general public or sell poor quality equipment. My machines are for professionals and I don't want to find them somewhere on Ebay next to an \$8 Chinese machine.

Marco: Who is your biggest mentor, inspiration or who would you thank?

Stefan: I had no mentor, just a few bad machines that didn't work they way I wanted. There is one guy though that I really have to thank a lot, Gerhard Wiesbeck of Time Travelling Tattoo. He always showed me a lot and told me many things about the skin, ink, needles and how a machine should work. We spent a lot of time testing, whilst doing my sleeves and back, trying out many different setups until I found the right 'formula'.

But it's not just about machine building. Within the last few years I've made many good friends in the tattoo industry, people who really care and are always there for you. I'm very happy to have so much contact with so many very, very talented artists. If someone told me six years ago that I would get to know all

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of these special people, I wouldn't have believed them. Many of these guys have pushed me forward and given me feedback about my work. I will never forget my customers who support me and my work. They are the reason that I can live my dream.

Last but not least, my wife Gina, my son Fernando, my parents, brother, sister and the guys who work with me and stand beside me and my company. Without all these beloved people it would not be possible. By the way, my father—who is 72 years old—is winding the coils for my machines ... day and night. He winds perfect coils. I think my dad is one of the oldest guys around who knows a lot about how to wind a perfect looking and working tattoo machine coil.

Marco: What are your favourite materials to work with?

Stefan: For the frames; high iron steel most of the time and sometimes brass for the side plates. I don't use any casted or aluminium frames as I don't have a lot of experience with it. I think a quality tool shouldn't have a casted frame. I also don't like CNC'd [computer numerically controlled] machine frames. If a computer cuts the frame, all the magic and soul is gone. You don't see any scratches or flaws and each machine looks like the other, nothing unique and completely monotone.

For binding posts I mostly use brass and copper. I also only use copper for the contact screws. I read a lot about which materials are best for the electrical flow. If you have 100% pure silver it is just a little bit better than pure copper for the electrical flow. What most customers don't know is that most 'silver' contact screws contain 85% silver and 15% chrome, so a contact screw made of 85% silver and 15% chrome, is definitely not better than a pure copper contact screw! Copper is easy to find in all diameters, while silver is not readily available in different diameters and is also very expensive.

For the springs we only use quality blue springs, mostly 0.018 and 0.016 thick. For the faster machines sometimes 0.020. Springs are very important so we make our own, lasered specifically to fit our machines perfectly.

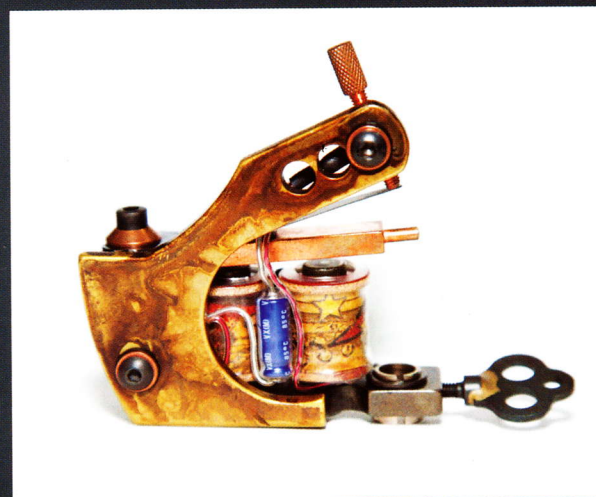
The rest of my machines are the highest quality, German made screws from 'Würth' and high quality copper wire. Only the phenolic washers for the coils we need to import from the states because they are not easy to get in Europe and Germany. My biggest secret is the material of the coil cores and only my father and I know exactly which material it is. It took me a very long time to find the right stuff!

Marco: What are your favourite specifications?

Stefan: I love to build many different kinds of machines, but mostly I like to make the Reverse machines. They sound like a tractor and have something mighty! When I walk around at conventions I can hear which artists use my Reverse machines. This baby sounds like a bulldozer and is very slow, but punches ink under skin like crazy! I also like to build all kinds of lining machines. This kind of machine always needs a special eye—liners must run absolutely stable to make, nice looking lines, especially fine lining.

Marco: What would you recommend to this unstoppable generation of upcoming artists worldwide?

Stefan: Anyone who wants to tattoo should first learn about proper hygiene. It is important to understand the implications of what you do when working with blood and the potential of spreading infection. If you want to become a pro, then get the pro equipment. Good equipment doesn't make you a good tattoo artist at once but it makes everything easier in the beginning. The real and true artists are the ones who love tattooing and carry the sacred art to the next level. From myself I know, you can only reach your goal if you stand behind what you are doing 100%. Not everyone who can hold a tattoo machine is a tattoo artist.

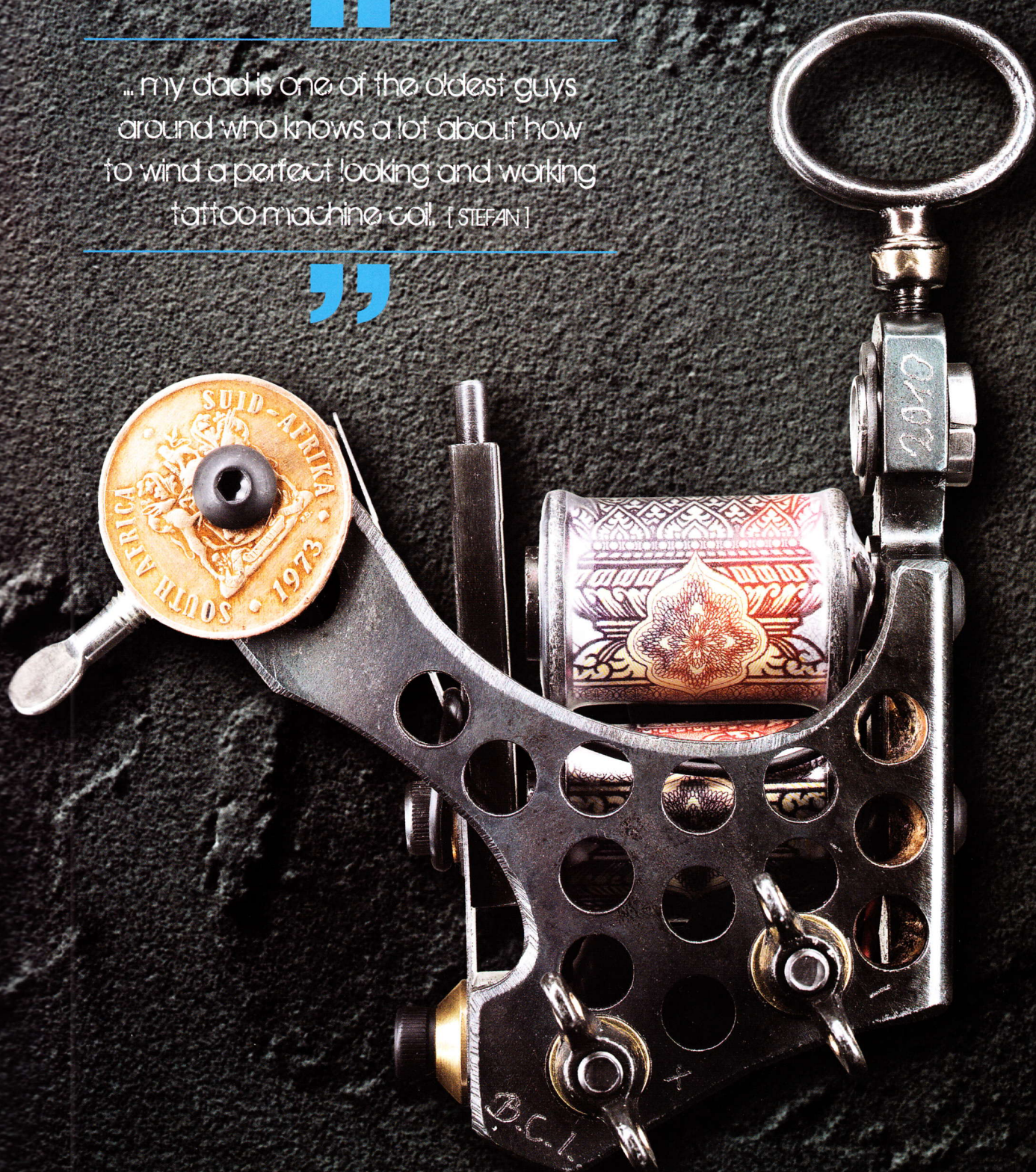


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Marco: What do you dream of?

Stefan: I'm living my dream, this is really all I always wanted. I have a good wife and lovely son and I earn money for my family and I am doing something I love to do. We are all very happy and loving life. It would be nice if we all get as old as possible! I don't need to become the most famous machine builder on the planet, I'm happy the way it is right now. From my experience I know that it can be completely different, especially in the beginning when no one knows you, it's a long road ...

Marco: Why and what are you doing to achieve your dream?

Stefan: There is only one way to achieve it; make no compromises and continue in the same direction. I have a big community of customers who support me to the max and I don't think the name Bavarian Custom Irons will be forgotten anytime soon. We already have so many machines on the market and in customers hands. I'm still the same guy that I was years before, making the same jokes, drinking the same beer and always trying to keep good contact with my friends and customers. There is no way to get 'out of the ring' and stop. I am too passionate about what I do and what I create to ever stop, which means I can only try to build better machines and provide a unique service. I can't imagine doing anything other than building machines; working with my hands and heart. I see no chance to go back to 'normal' work again. I will continue to get tattooed as much as possible and hopefully complete my full body suit in the next few years ... so that no one will give me a job [laughs].

Marco: What would you like people to remember your machines as?

Stefan: Remember? Hey man I'm still here, I'm a young guy only 35 years [laughs]! Everyone who is interested should know that my machines are handmade and have soul. It's not about the money. I try to do my part in the history of tattooing. I think it is the same way a serious artist tries to do his best when drawing and tattooing. I would never ship a machine which I'm not 100% happy with how it runs and looks. The same goes for my service; after the customer purchases it, I am always there for him or her when he has a problem or is not happy about something on his new machine. It is a lifetime bound to the machine and my company. Many of my customers become good friends. This is also one thing which makes this job so completely different to any other job I did before!

Marco: Do you take custom orders? How busy are you and what is the wait time? How do we contact you?

Stefan: Yes, we do take custom orders. When clients ideas don't always make the machine run as they imagine, I talk to the customer to find a better solution with which he/she is then 100% happy. Wait time is around four weeks. The easiest way to contact me is by email, facebook or phone. All contact details are on our website www.bavariancustomirons.de.

Marco: Finally, tell us the difference between your machines and other brands?

Stefan: I don't like to talk about other builders and brands. Everyone who is serious about building good machines will do their best to produce machines their customers and themselves are happy about. My machines are not perfect but I have learnt from my failures. I would love to know how much cash I wasted on the wrong materials, screws and parts [laughs]!

Thank you very much for the interview and of course thanks a lot to everyone who took the time to read it! ■

Stefan's hand made machines are available in Australia and New Zealand from Custom Irons Tattoo Supplies: www.customirons.net or phone +61 (0) 431 380 200.

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