

LEGO® SPORTS

Playing the game

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SPORTS is one of those themes that has always been present in LEGO® models. Mainly in the motor sports area, there have always been cars, motors, speedboats and other vehicles for competitions in the catalogue, even before the appearance of the minifig. But in 2000 the company took an important step in the incorporation of sports sets. Captained by the image of Zidane, 15 official football sets were launched, and this would be the start of a significant series of sets related to different sports, all of which have a high level of playability. The theme was called SPORTS (although initially it wasn't presented under that name). Within this theme, there were sets dedicated to football, basketball, ice hockey and the Gravity Games (Skateboarding and Snowboarding).

The main strong point of the sets was their playability. They had to be fun and spark many hours of entertainment, be it alone or in company. The sets were not limited to the playing fields or ranks, but there were many complementary training sets, which allowed the gradual introduction of the sport up to the set that recreated a championship. This philosophy was applied mainly to the football and basketball sets. The other sports were more of a secondary nature, as they more minority

sports (skateboarding and snowboarding) or more focussed on local markets (Ice Hockey for the USA and Canada).

Football

Before going deeper into the SPORTS line I need to make reference to 1998 when, coinciding with the World Championships in France a number of promotional sets for the oil company Shell were launched. The first LEGO football field was made up of two 48x48 baseplates decorated with the lines of the field and in two shades to simulate the different cutting of the grass. There were some polybag with players from different teams, like Holland, Scotland, England, Germany and Austria. In order to complete the team, there was a set with a goal keeper, another one with referees, and accessories to finish the playing field, like grades, a press area, a medical unit, and even riot police. The sets weren't very playable as far as the sport is concerned as there was no system to play the ball. These sets were not widespread as they were difficult to get and today the prices of those sets are quite high.

On the occasion of the Eurocup in 2000, celebrated in Belgium



and Holland, LEGO® launched playable football sets with the star player Zinedine Zidane depicted on all the boxes. These sets allowed you to build a complete football stadium, with a playing field, grades, a score board, a commentator's booth, first aid, buses for the teams and expansion and training sets.



The football field was 6 against 6, which could be increased to 11 against 11 by adding 3 expansion sets. The players of this championship wore t-shirts and there was a sticker sheet to personalize each minifig with a number. The buses on the other hand corresponded to players from different teams all over the world. Their torsos were plain and the different bus sets contained sticker sheets to personalize each team with flags from different countries. Each of the 4 buses had a different set of stickers so if you wanted to have all the countries you had to buy four of them.

The training sets were quite curious and reflected different methods to practise scoring. There was also a special set that allowed you to play just about anywhere, consisting of a box on which a lid was placed and that could be attached to your belt. Inside the box two minifigs could be stored in addition to the necessary parts for the training and after taking off the lid, the box was used as a goal.



The method of playing is simple but efficient. Using a part that was especially designed for this set, the Sports Field Section 8 x 16 [picture X]. This element has a hole in the centre that can hold a Technic pin onto which a second part is attached that is specific for this system, the White Sports Minifig Stand Soccer with Spring and Green Pin [picture X]. This part has a spring, two studs to place the minifig, a small notch in the front part for the ball and a lip on the backside. By pressing the lip on the back and releasing it suddenly the ball is shot. It can be shot in any direction as the Technic pin allows the pedestal to turn 360 degrees in the Sports Field Section.

In order to make this first edition collectible some special parts were added:

- A Zidane minifig
- An Adidas™ ball

The minifig was exclusively available in the 3401 training set. As a curious detail, this set exists both with and without the Zidane minifig. I don't know what criterion was followed for the distribution of these versions. The ball was exclusive of the 3409 football field.

In 2001 two small sets were launched, one of a Japanese football team, exclusive to Japan and a feminine team, exclusive to the USA.



In 2002, coinciding with the World Cup in Japan and South Korea there was another massive launch of football sets. Most of these were promotional polybags for the Coca-Cola™ company, exclusively available in Japan. There were players for two teams with Coca-Cola t-shirts, and all kinds of accessories, like ice boxes, stretchers, benches etc. There were also special bags, Secret A and B which could contain a minifig with a silver or gold coloured Coca-Cola t-shirt. The rest, available all over the world, were very similar to the sets from 2000. A football field 6 vs 6 (3420), a smaller one of 3 vs 3 (3421) and, finally a complete field of 11 vs 11 (3425). There was also some training sets similar to those from 2000 although with a better finishing.

In this year there were also special sets like the 3420 -the French football team - with a uniform consisting of an RFFF t-shirt and Adidas™ → shorts. This set was launched to commemorate the 1998 Worldcup and the 2000 Eurocup which were both won by this team. In this case, the box was also special, featuring a photo of the players of the team. There was also a special 3425 with the American football team, although in this case the minifigs were normal and came with stickers of the North American Football Federation.

Finally, there was a re-edition of the 3407 bus (the red one), sponsored by Adidas, which included a real football decorated with LEGO motifs.



Between 2003 and 2005 there was a break in which - with the exception of a few promotional sets - there were no new football sets. During those years however, LEGO® launched sets featuring other sports which I will mention later on.

In 2006 there was a last return to the football sets, which would also be the last of LEGO SPORTS. There was a slightly different football field consisting of Sports Field Section 8 x 16 which were placed on a plastic base which also served as stands and lamp post support. The field was 6 vs 6. Other novelties were the lamp posts, the grades for spectators and the new goals, substituting the one consisting of LEGO parts and a net for a new 3-piece setup with the same unction. There was also a 2 vs 2 field and a training set you could attach to your belt, similar to those from 2002.

Finally there was a much sought after promotional set which was launched in 2007 and was a gift from Adidas™ when you bought a pair of sports shoes - the set included a goal keeper you could personalize with Adidas™ stickers and, most importantly, a gold coloured ball.

The balls worth a special mention. In each of the stages, in addition to the standard black and white football, specially decorated balls have appeared depending on the different championships. In 2000 there was a replica of the ADIDAS TRICOLORE from the 1998 Worldcup. In 2002, there was a replica of the ADIDAS FEVERNOVA and in 2006 of the ADIDAS TEAMGEIST. In addition to those three, in 2006 there was a blue ADIDAS ball with the 2 vs 2 field and the gold coloured ADIDAS TEAMGEIST reappeared in a promotional set. Some of these balls are very hard to get and others are collectors items. In my collection I only miss the gold coloured TEAMGEIST.

Basketball

In 2003 LEGO surprised its fans by launching a series of basketball sets after reaching an agreement with the North-American Basketball League (NBA). The engineering work done on these sets is among the best I have seen in the last couple of years. A simple system that, with the use of springs inserted in the legs of the minifigs, allows them to pick up and launch the basketball.

The underlying philosophy is the same as with the football sets. On the one hand there are play fields and on the other hand training sets. In this case there were 3 courts, a 2 vs 2 (3431) and two complete 5 vs 5. One of them only has two small stands at each end of the court (3431) and the other is just like a big NBA stadium with stands all around and with special concave parts to make sure the ball always returns to the court (3433). There were a total of 8 training sets with different activities like scoring, blocking and sped tests. As you will no doubt be aware, the American are very interested in memorabilia and collectables. LEGO was well aware of this trait and launched 8 boxes (3560-3567) with 3 NBA players in each one. A total of 24 charismatic players which were placed on a base and a card indicating the characteristics of each player. Among those 24 players we can be proud to see Pau Gasol, playing for the Memphis Grizzlies. Although he had only been in th NBA for a short time

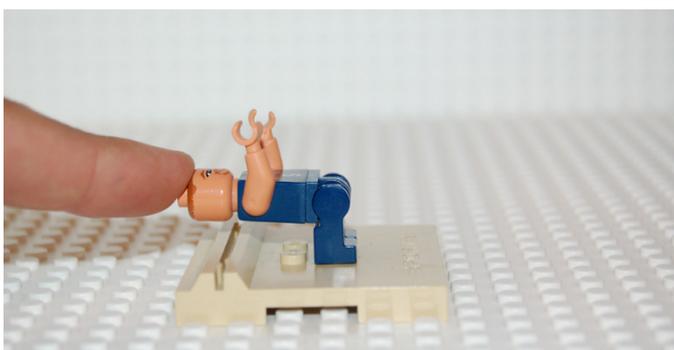
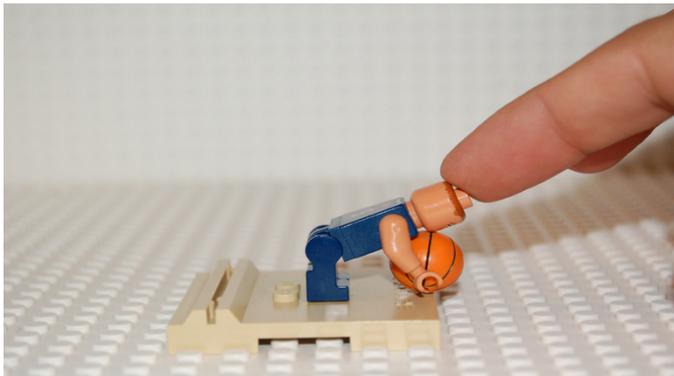




he already stood out as a player and his minifig was included in the first set of the series, 3560. These sets were not much appreciated in Spain (although only the sets 3560 to 3563 were available here) and until recently they could be found on sale in many shops.

The method for playing is simple but fantastic. The springs in the legs of the minifigs allow these to bend forwards and backwards. The arms are also special. The hands are fixed, the arms work like a hook and are prepared in such a way that they can be put at a 90° angle to the body and stay fixed in that position. The minifig is placed on a Tan Sports Minifig Stand Basketball, which is connected to the Sports Field Section which reproduces part of an NBA court by means of a Technic axle pin. To pick up the ball the minifig needs to bend forwards. The arms click around the ball. If you then bend the minifig backwards (pushing the head backwards) it is ready to launch the ball. When you let go of the head, the ball is launched. Depending on how much force you apply the ball will be launched a certain distance. For long shots there are legs with stronger springs (one of the springs is yellow) to allow a more powerful launch.

On the basketball courts and in some training sets there is a defence mechanism consisting in a player who can move both vertically and horizontally. Here another curious part is used, a



milky white car tyre, a colour that is exclusive to these sets. In my opinion these are the most fun and most playable sets in the SPORTS range. With only 5 minutes of practice you can score points and after that you're ready for hours of fun. Playing a game against anyone else is a sure source of laughs.

Ice Hockey

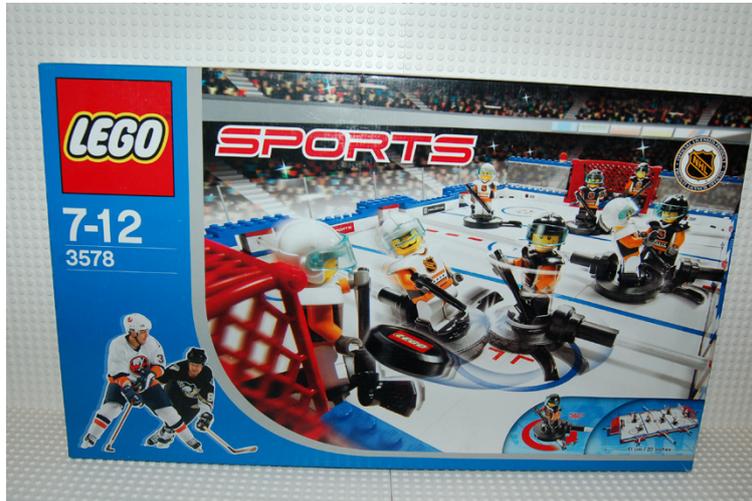
Another American sport that was licensed by LEGO® was Ice Hockey (NHL). In this case there were two types of sets, one at minifig scale and a second more similar to Technic. Personally I'm only interested in the minifig scale sets.

There were only two of these, but they caused a great impression. There is a small street hockey rink 1 vs 1 (3579) and an NHL stadium 5 vs 5 (3578). This last set contains a number of special parts like protection for the players, the puck or the first ever Tile 8 x 16. One team wears white and the other black. The protection had the NHL logo. The set included a sticker sheet to personalize the players with the colours of different NHL teams.



The way the game is played is somewhat different from the other sports. A number of parts were designed that could hit the puck and be attached to a Technic axle. The minifig was placed on top of these parts and turned together with them. This way you can shoot the puck with considerable force, although the Technic axles hinder the movement of the players in the field. However, the game was well designed and allowed you to enjoy a good match.





As a special complement a reproduction of the Stanley Cup was designed - this cup is given to the winner of the NHL play-offs. It is quite a good reproduction made primarily with chrome silver parts and it is a good complement to this series.

Gravity Games

With this name, that originates from a multi-sport competition of extreme sports, there were sets with two different themes: Skateboarding and Snowboarding

There were two skateboarding sets. One street set and one with a half pipe. There isn't much to be said about these sets except for the excellent reproduction of the skateboard areas and a curious part, the Tan Turntable Spinning with Sports Trick Handle 2 x 24 x 4 1/3 which served to allow a skater to turn 180, 360 or 540 degrees. It takes a little getting used to, but it is fun to play with.

The three snowboarding sets are good fun to play with. The smallest one (3536 - Snowboarding in Air Comp) is a jump the snowboard can make with different movements, depending of the angle you set the lever that launches the snowboard. The snowboard is a specific part that has a weight inside, giving it a certain inertia and allowing it to make certain movements. The second one (3538 - Snowboard Boarder Cross Race) is a downhill race between two competitors. The piste, built

with white baseplates and curved slopes, presents different obstacles which, depending on how you start the descent (which can be changed in the vertical plane) can be taken in different ways. Additionally there is a part where you can make a jump by elevating part of the piste. I have to say that each descent is different and the way you take the obstacles varies even if you start from the same position.

The biggest one was the Half Pipe (3585 - Snowboard Super Pipe). You had to complete several turns to complete the run. There are two ways to play. The minifig could be launched from a ramp and be allowed to move depending on inertia, or using the Tan Turntable Spinning with Sports Trick Handle 2 x 24 x 4 1/3 which, like in the case of the Skateboard, allowed you to make different turns and movements.

As you will have noticed from the article I'm an unconditional fan of this theme. Of all the sports, the one that fascinates me most is Basketball. I think it is a brilliant system (often what is simplest works best). I think it is a pity these sets have gone unnoticed for many fans as they are highly playable and well designed. Finally I would like to encourage you to get a set from the SPORTS theme (although it is more and more difficult to find them).and try it out. It may change your perception of these sets.

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