

LEGO® Train: The story of an obsession (II)

1991-2011

By Manticore

Pictures by Brickset and Manticore

Here we are again to continue this review on rails. As mentioned in the previous article, 1986 was marked by the disappearance of the 4.5V and 12V systems. Nothing more was heard of the TRAIN theme until five years later. It was a year before the Dream Team left the world speechless at the Barcelona '92 Olympics, R.E.M. published its successful "Out of Time" and Freddy mercury left an incalculable musical legacy at his passing away. Basketball, music and, of course, bricks. Yes friends, it was 1991, the year LEGO® surprised us with the return of the TRAIN theme, but with a new system: 9V

It was very similar to the discontinued 12V system, but the electric current no longer circulated through the central conducting rail, but the rails that till then were made of plastic were now covered with a metallic conductor. The geometry of the rails was the same, but neither the 12V circuits nor the 4.5V system interface with the new system. The advantage is that for the first time each part of the track was a single piece: no rails, no sleepers, no central conductive rails.

Aside from this, the 9V system had more limitations as far as control different elements and speed was concerned. The transformer/speed regulator is still required and comes with 6 different intensities in each direction.



Several trains can run at the same time, but the 9V system did not include such exceptional elements as remote controlled crossings, signals, lights and decouplers. Of course there were several sets to provide the necessary atrezzo for any TRAIN layout, but it no longer felt like the scale model layout the collection of the 12V system gave.

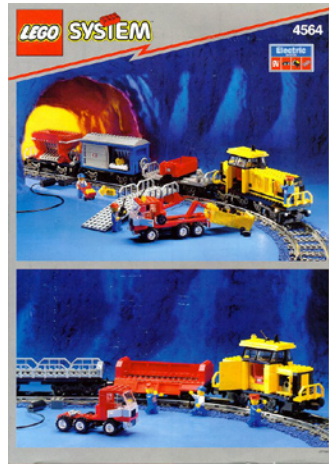
However, the launch of more modern, realistic and emblematic sets like the ones that will be shown further on has made TRAIN AFOLS see this system with different eyes.

9V TRAINS

The first complementary sets that came out in 1991 are two trains; a cargo train (4563, Load and Haul Railroad), and a passenger train, the incomparable and already mythical 4558 Metroliner. This set allowed you to build two different train designs. The original one, with two identical engines, and the secondary with a single engine, a passenger wagon and a cargo wagon.

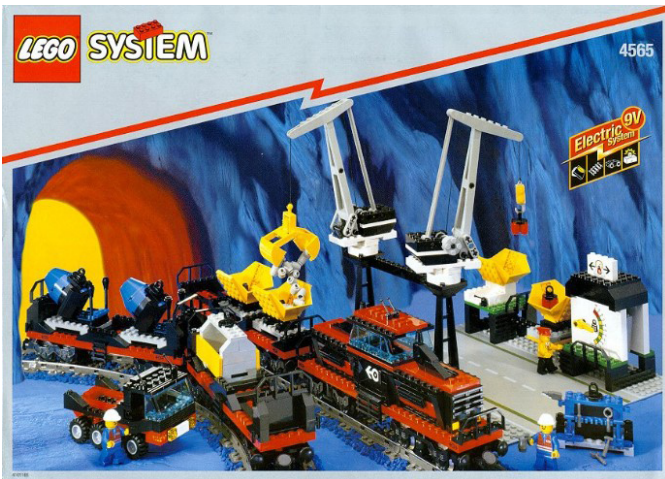


Both had exceptional playability as in addition to the train itself, there were other elements that turned both sets into hours and hours of playtime. In addition, the 4563 came with a speed regulator: open, build and play. Aside from a perfect engine it had three cargo wagons of different design to avoid getting bored.



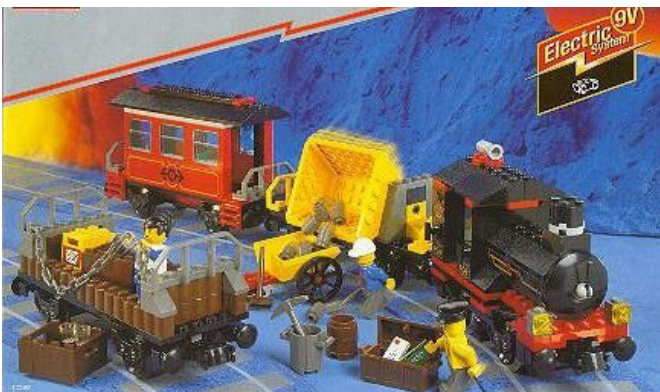
It will be several years before another complete set comes out, the 4564: Freight Rail Runner. Another cargo train that is quite similar to its predecessor, the 4563

By 1996 the second passenger train appears (4559, Cargo Railway) and a third cargo train (4565, Freight and Crane Railway). The 4559 had a strange system of interchangeable passenger pods I would rather not try out in person.



The design was rather more sober (to use an appropriate adjective) than that of the Metroliner. We are getting dangerously close to the worst years of LEGO® TRAIN. This can not be said of the 4565 which still gives great playability (especially with the cranes and cargo station) without losing in design.

A couple of years later a special set comes out that brakes away from all that went before. the 3225: Classic Train:



As the same indicates, it is a replica of the first passenger trains that travelled from west of North America. A steam engine with a passenger wagon of the period, together with two cargo wagons. All in one. In the same year (1998) another passenger train came out (4560) which was brought out a second time including a speed regulator (4561):



In the first year of the 21st century, LEGO surprised with a theme that differed from the classical TRAIN concept. I'm referring to MY OWN TRAIN, more specific designs of engines and wagons that were sold separately. Apart from these new sets, LEGO again sold the Metroliner and its panoramic wagon in the LEGENDS theme. With good reason, right? We reach 2002. The North American public is rewarded with a precious classic set: the 4535, Express Deluxe:



The reduced version 4534, (Express... not so Deluxe) is so much less interesting once you see its big brother I will not include a picture of it. Very similar to the Classic Train 3225, but with a more special look and bigger.

Well, what happened to My Own Train? We have hardly mentioned it. Rightly so; I was waiting for 2002 in this historic review, the year in which LEGO surprised with a replica of the Santa Fe. The "Santa Fe Southern Railway" is a short railway line that connects the cities of Lamy and Santa Fe in the state of New Mexico (U.S.A.). Currently it is only a tourist attraction, the passenger wagons have been maintained from the 1920s

and each return trip is supposed to be a unique experience. As an interesting detail, this train has preference over all other trains.

On the other hand, the “Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad” is a railway company (also in the U.S.A.) that is oriented to cargo transport.

So what does that have to do with our favourite toy? Well, as of 2002 a lot, since LEGO®, with the collaboration of James Mathis, launched the 10020, 10022 and 10025, which together make up the Santa Fe Chief, a train that became famous in the 30s for connecting Chicago and Los Angeles in less than 40 hours... almost nothing...



But we have skipped two sets. A passenger train, the 4511: High Speed Train, and a cargo train, the 4512: Cargo Train. Despite coming out right in the middle of the worst era as far as design is concerned, these are two very good looking trains. Especially the cargo train. The passenger train has the minor drawback that the set itself (an engine and a single wagon) is rather poor. Especially taking into account it is a high speed train that needs many more wagons and two engines. However, when you combine two engines with a sufficient number of wagons things change considerably. I suppose the people at TLG were conscious of this evaluation and a year later there were two sets, 10157 and 10158: the engine and the wagon individually. A state secret: its cheaper to buy two 4511.

The 10022 can be built either as a restaurant wagon, panoramic wagon or sleep wagon, while the 10025 allows for two different designs: a luggage wagon or a mail wagon. As a curious fact, the first 10,000 sets of the 10020 were marked as “Limited Edition”, whereas later sets did not have this annotation on the box. Maybe they didn’t expect the success they had or it was simply a marketing strategy.



Another exclusive for the North American market was the 65537, Classic Freight Train, which came out in 2004. It is a beautiful classic and little known model.



And in the years 2004 and 2005 the 10133 Burlington Northern Santa Fe engine was released, with the typical colours of the BNSF, based on the GP38 diesel engine; and the 10170 (TTX Intermodal Double-Stack Car), with which you can make a spectacular cargo train.

And the last 9V set was the 10173: Holiday Train, sold during the Christmas campaign of 2006.



RC TRAINS (REMOTE CONTROL)

In the same year (2006) the fourth LEGO® TRAIN system is born. Forget about electrified tracks, metal rails and central lines. After nearly 40 years we are back at the beginning and the rails simply carry the train. The form factor is maintained however: each single piece is a 16 stud track. A new wagon that holds the batteries receives a wireless signal from a speed regulator



and sends it to the motor. It was a very comfortable system as there were no cables, but the old romanticism is gone. The only two trains in this system are, for a change, a passenger and a cargo train.



The design of both sets is well done, especially the cargo train, but the system appears to have been a simple transition between 9V and the current system: Power Functions.

PF TRAINS (POWER FUNCTIONS)

In 2007, LEGO Technic presents the 8275, a bulldozer that includes new motors that can be controlled by an IR remote. It is the Power Functions system, PF for the initiated, which two years later, in 2009 is incorporated in LEGO TRAINS and effectively ended the RC system, as with an IR receiver and much smaller battery practically the same speed could be achieved with better power due to the higher torque of the motor.



In addition to this novelty which breaks away from all that went before, the new concept of flexible rails is introduced that will allow geometries heretofore impossible.

And the first train to which the new system could be applied was the Emerald Night; a beauty that includes an A3 Pacific steam engine and a no less beautiful restaurant wagon.



The set included large wheels to emulate those of the old steam engines in which the powered wheel passed the movement on to the others by means of a bar, in this case a liftarm this. These wheels were fitted with a rubber to ensure traction. It is a curious fact that 40 years later we have come back to the same method used in the LEGO trains of the 60s and 70s.

But it wasn't until a year later (June 2010), that LEGO brought out the first fully PF sets which were brought out simultaneously: a passenger train (7938) and a cargo train (7939) that was very similar to the preceding RC cargo train (7898).





The last PF train is another cargo train that is again similar to the previous one, but in red. The name is a bit of a giveaway: Red Cargo Train



It was launched in August 2011. A beautiful engine and three wagons which, together with the accessory sets, ensure many hours of fun. Wait, did I say last train? In April last year the fans of the TRAIN theme suffered a blue shock... Yes, the one commonly known as the MAERSK train. A colour that was reserved to exclusive sets (and with astronomical prices) becomes accessible to a large portion of fans.



The engine is practically identical to the Burlington Santa Fe we have already seen. But this special colour gives it a different look. Two simple wagons for containers and a truck complete the set.

COMPLEMENTARY SETS

In addition to complete train sets we should have a look at those that complete any TRAIN layout. Stations for example. What to say of the magnificent 4554, a reference for any expert.



The set has a "sister" that is practically identical but red and which was launched some years later (2150).



The rest of the stations that have come out till the present day always take up a secondary place if compared to any of the earlier ones. The design of the latest one stands out, the 7997:



and the 7937, more than anything else because it looks like a tribute to the mythical 7822 with its overpass.



At least that's how I see it. Maybe it is just that I haven't got past my 80s addiction.

Another station, a cargo station, that deserves mention is the 4555:



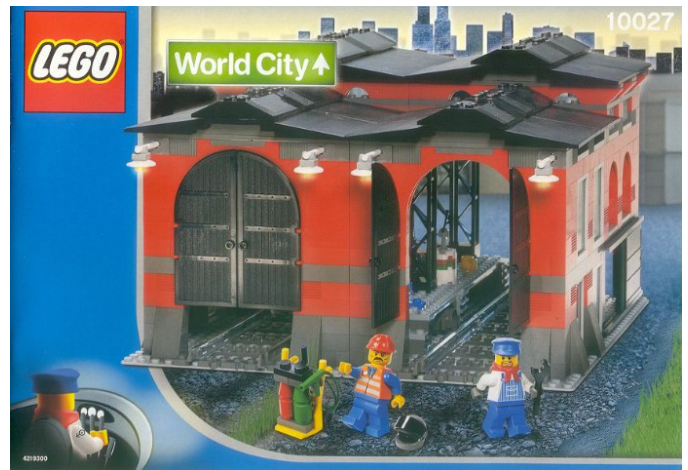
In my opinion it is one of the best TRAIN sets. For its design and playability. If I had had that container crane when I was young I would still be in primary school. The level crossings never top the simplicity and innocence of the earlier sets. Quite to the contrary, they are more detailed and bigger. For example set number 10128.

And if it is wagons we are talking about, we should highlight those from the MY OWN TRAIN series. An open hopper wagon, a fuel tank wagon and a cargo wagon. I should also mention one of the best wagons, the 4552.



The thing is, when I see a crane I get the itches...

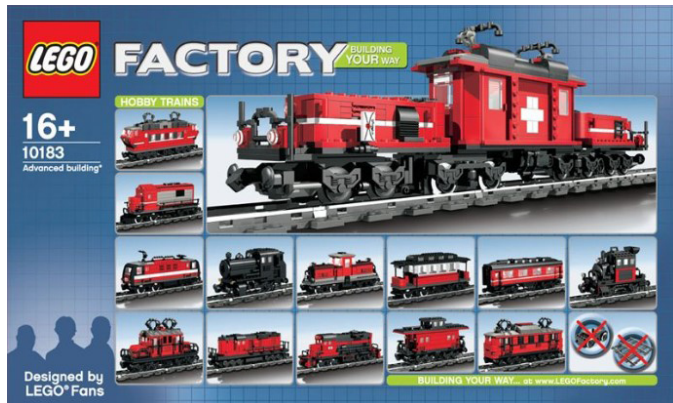
Another novelty that didn't exist before is this trains shed: Train Engine Shed.



For maintaining, cleaning and repairing the engines and wagons. It can also be placed horizontally to give better playability and depending on the layout. I've left the individual engines for the end. Besides the engine from the 4511 which was also sold separately, as well as others from the MY OWN TRAIN theme, it would be inexcusable not to mention the Crocodile, launched in 1991.



This characteristic name may be due to the three-part articulated body or because, originally, these engines were dark green. Be it as it may, in this set LEGO® captured one of the best known engines in Europe. So much so that 16 years after the fact, in 2007, there is another very similar engine that marked the end of the 9V era: the 10183 Hobby Train.



With a more refined design and more details, it belongs to the FACTORY theme, sets that were designed by expert fans. With the parts in the set a total of 14 different designs could be built.

Finally, I wanted to mention that for someone born in the 70s like me, it is only normal to prefer the older sets because of what they meant to me as a kid. However, I must recognise that the current TRAIN system has a lot of details, and the PF system has advantages, some obvious, like the remote control of the speed of the trains. But above all, it allows an unlimited number of trains to use the same circuit without losing power the way it happened in the 9V system and its metallic rails. The limit is the length of the track. Maintaining the track in optimum conditions is also easier due to the absence of metal. This may be an irrelevant detail to a kid who starts with his first LEGO train, but for those of us who are a little older and who have 20-year-old 9V rails, the difference is noticeable.

On the other hand, the use of a rechargeable lithium-polymer battery avoids the impracticable original PF battery box, something that was indispensable in the older 4,5V trains. In addition to being smaller, its weight (75gr.) is an advantage

compared to a full battery box (about 125gr). The only drawback could be the Technic holes, but that is a small problem that can easily be solved as it can be integrated as a mega-brick of 8x4x4 studs.

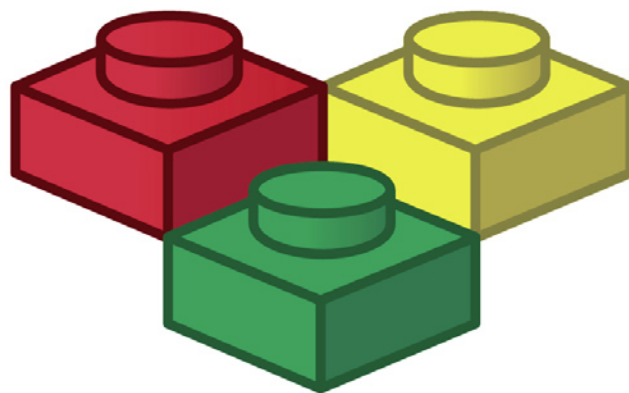


The new PF trains do not incorporate this rechargeable battery, however, in its place there is a box of the same dimensions that holds 6 AAA batteries to provide the necessary 9V.

So it is all advantages, except for those of us who have spent hour after hour playing with a 9V regulator wishing it to be 12V who have a hard time assimilating all this. It will be a question of buying the latest sets and letting my son decide which is best. A good enough excuse for my wife not to get mad: "No more LEGO please.....!"

That's all dear readers. I apologise for the quality of home made pictures. I like building mile-long trains, not taking pictures of them with my simple digital camera. The rest of the images come from Brickset.com.

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Brickset.com