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Tomart's

No. 60 January \$5.95

ACTION FIGURE

DIGEST

**Insider
Marty Abrams
Tells the Mego Story**



Insider Marty Abrams Tells the Mego Story



Marty Abrams displaying the gold-plated Baron Karza Micronauts figure made for him by Takara in honor of the millionth Micronauts figure produced.

Marty's father, David Abrams, started Mego in 1952 after several successes in the toy business for other companies. The company was given its name by brother Howie. Whenever the family prepared to leave the house, Howie would always say, "Me go, Me go, too!" So when David Abrams went into business for himself, he named the company Mego in tribute to his 8 year old son's constant reminder.

There has been much speculation about The Mego Toy Company and many rumors in collector circles. Mego was THE action figure company of the '70s. Tomart is in the process of putting together a definitive book on the history of the company with color photos of all the action figure-related toys, including variations in products and packaging. It is a huge undertaking. Much more was produced than most collectors realize. The publication date will be announced soon.

Marty Abrams, now president of Abrams/Gentile Entertainment, has provided unusual candor. Mego was a family company, but Marty took the reins in 1971 when his mother and father moved to Hong Kong to oversee the production side of the business. For years, Mego was just something in his past, but now he has agreed to tell how Mego pioneered the toy licensing business and how all the deals were made. To say Marty Abrams is dynamic is an understatement. He's a born salesman, has a unique understanding about what kids like, and can mesmerize you with his storytelling ability.

Marty graduated from New York University in 1965 with a degree in International Marketing. His ambition was to join a major Madison Avenue advertising agency. A chance trip to Hong Kong with his family and new wife (now married for more than 30 years) changed his life's direction.



The company originally put together 88¢ toy sales as a package for a wide variety of retailers. When Barbie became a hit, the company came out with the Maddie Mod doll named after Marty's mother, Madeline. Of course, the doll was the same size as Barbie and all her clothes would also fit Mattel's fashion princess. When Hasbro developed G.I. Joe, Mego introduced Fighting Yank and sold uniforms and accessories galore.

Mego's first action figure developed without any competitive influence was the Joe Namath figure. "Joe led the New York Jets to a Super Bowl championship. It was just short of a miracle and I thought a figure of Joe Namath would have appeal well beyond the New York market," Marty recalled, "so I get on the phone and locate Joe's lawyer. I'm young...he's young...we're all in our 20s and we work out a deal. The next spring we go into production on a 12" figure of Joe. Orders were great, but in the first pre-season game Joe gets injured and is out for the



year. We also made a 15" version which actually threw a football. I think we sold about 10 of those."

Fortunately, sales were strong enough to pay for tooling and production, but profits evaporated for each of the reorders. Even though Mego would produce figures of many other personalities, the company never again counted so heavily on a living person because of the Joe Namath experience.

So Mego had put a lot of resources into the 12" Joe Namath figure, but the size was just too large for any vehicles and playsets, so the body parts were resized down to eight inches for the fictional character...Action Jackson. The commercials for Action Jackson were cutting edge. The toys seemed fantastically real. In fact...too real!...and in violation of the new National Association of Broadcasters code regarding children's TV commercial. It made no difference Mego was never sent a copy of the new rules, the NAB under government pressure forced TV stations to pull the spots.

The only saving factor was that toy buyers stocked up based on previewing the first commercials and Mego once again recouped most of the costs involved. This time the company had a large inventory of 8" bodies when the second set of TV spots failed to generate anticipated reorders.

Enter Stan Weston, the man who took the G.I. Joe concept to Ted Levine at Hasbro. "Stan came to me with this Dick Tracy figure. It was 8" like Action Jackson," Abrams recalled. "All I would need to do would be to change heads. The outfits would require no tooling. I loved the concept and presentation, but I didn't think Dick Tracy would sell. So, then he pulls out Charlie Chan, The Phantom, he seemed to have every cartoon character...The Lone Ranger and Tonto were others. Can you get me Batman...and Robin...and Superman?" I asked.

"Sure, no problem," replies Stan. "A few days later he's back in my office. The box art is the best I've ever seen, so I take the mock-up home and show 'em to my son, Kenny. He looks 'em over. Where's Spiderman?" he says. The next day I call Stan and I ask, "Can you get me Spiderman too?" I got the same response, "sure, no problem."

Back in those days The Licensing Corporation of America represented DC and Warner Brothers characters, but there were no other big licensing agencies or departments like there are today. It was just someone in the office or a lawyer somewhere.

Stan didn't have the rights, but he knew how to go about getting them. He did manage to get the deal together and the first four Official World's Greatest Super Heroes were launched in 1972...but not without a couple of major problems. Marvel and DC both objected to their characters appearing on box art together. The solution was easy. Shazam replaced Captain America to resolve a DC box and





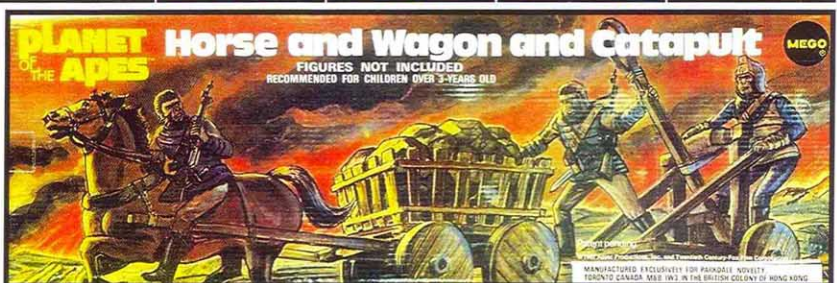
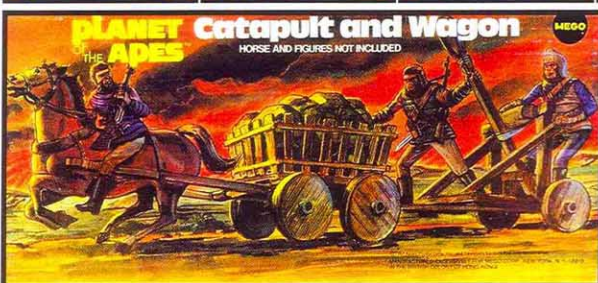
new art for Marvel characters featuring Spiderman and Captain America was created. To protect the brand for what was becoming a very popular toy group, Marty registered the Superhero trademark in Mego's name. Again the super comic legal powers hit the roof and Marty turned the name over to both companies.

The rest of super hero stories will have to wait for the book because the Mego history is so rich in other ways.

Planet of the Apes was the first film property for Mego. Marty went to a showing of all three films with his son and the next morning was on the phone to 20th Century Fox.

The toys were a huge hit. Everything Marty envisioned for *Action Jackson* came true with the Apes.

His next conquest was *Star Trek*. The seeds for a long relationship with Paramount were sown. The figures were based on the TV characters, but the Bridge playset with the





Examples from other popular Mego 8" figure series.

Micronauts-style magnetic super heroes tested in Europe.

vanishing/appearing Transporter chamber was a major factor in success of the line.

Mego was moving up and hired a major PR firm. They introduced him to Mervin LaRoy, the producer of *Wizard of Oz*, who promptly went to work on Marty to follow the yellow brick road to a successful toy line. "The idea didn't seem great. It wasn't an action figure. It wasn't a girl's line. It wasn't a pre-school line. It was a hybrid...a twist, so I'm reluctant." Mervin says to me, "We'll throw them a big party, invite stars, really launch the product." "More out of respect for Mervin and the desire to make more Hollywood connections," I said, "OK."

The buyer response was enthusiastic. Additional requests were so strong, the event had to be moved to the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria, the biggest room available at the time. "Over 1500 people showed up," Marty remembered. "The show started on the big screen with clips of the film. As the music swelled, the screen went up to reveal Margaret Hamilton, Jack Hailey, Roy Bolger with Mervin LaRoy doing the introductions as each guest performed. The ballroom went wild. The stars were wonderful and did autographs for all who wanted them after the toys were presented...and we wrote over \$5 million worth of orders that night."

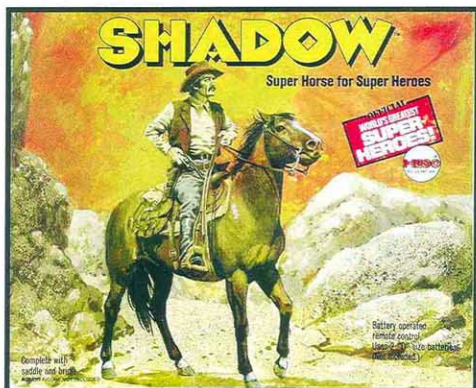
Mego was rolling. The cash flow permitted risk on TV shows and other properties not possible in previous years. Sonny and Cher were already divorced when the line was introduced, but still it was a big success. Even the marginal properties succeeded to some degree...or they weren't made. *Logan's Run*, turnabout monsters, and Barbie Benton figures were all cancelled before production.

Marty Abrams was in Tokyo finalizing the deal for

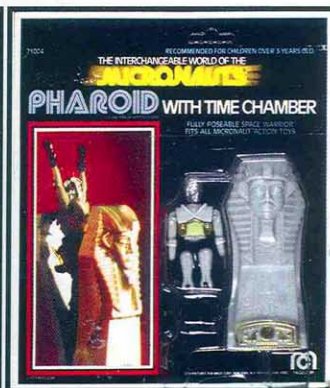
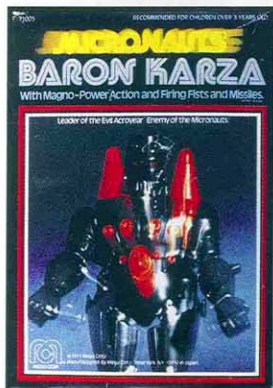
Micronauts when the 20th Century Fox representative came calling unannounced with a new prosperity called *Star Wars*. Of course no one knew what *Star Wars* would become at that time. When asked where Marty was, his lawyers (without knowing the property being offered) responded, "He is in Japan finalizing a deal on a new space property." Thinking the leading action figure company wouldn't be interested in a second space property, he went across the street and offered the deal to Bernie Loomis of Kenner for only a \$25,000 advance. The rest is history.

It was a reversal of fortunes for Mego. *Micronauts* was an outstanding performer against the first *Star Wars* film, but ran out of steam soon after the *Empire* struck back. A bigger problem were the other space properties engineered to compete against *Star Wars*. *Flash Gordon* (1976), *Star Trek: The Movie* (1979), *Buck Rogers* (1979), and particularly *The Black Hole* (1980) failed to produce profits. Mego put up a million dollar guarantee on *The Black Hole* which could have prevented the crippled company from going any further except for one lucky break. Disney's next great expectations were lying on a film they had already publicised as *Tron*. However, Mego's lawyers had protected the name along with Biotron, Microtron, and other Micronaut character names. Disney was also embarrassed over the colossal failure of the hastily produced sci-fi epic gone wrong and left Mego off the hook in exchange for rights to the *Tron* name.

Mego was still acquiring good properties and Marty Abrams still had some magic left in his bag of tricks. He had always loved the Britain's die-cast miniature soldiers. He knew they had both an adult and kid following. He also



Unproduced 12" scale Old B.O.B. Prototype



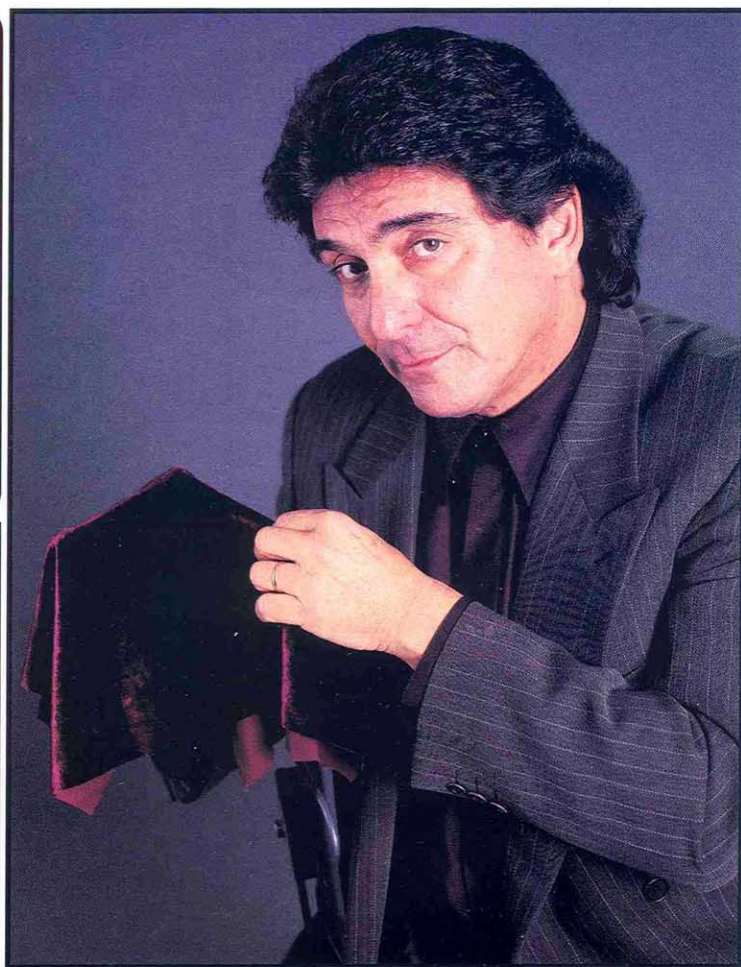


knew they were very expensive hand-painted figures. He was banking the playsets, vehicles, and accessories made possible by doing these mass-produced figures in a 2" scale. The line was called *Eagle Force* and had most of the attributes of the 1982 reintroduction of *G.I. Joe*. It was the *Eagle Force* against R.I.O.T. (The Rising International Organization of Tyranny). Target took the first 30,000 pieces and they sold out over the first weekend. As the remaining distribution fell into place, the government was beginning to focus on Mego. The Feds had been investigating the East Coast Longshoreman's Unions and thought

they found evidence of Mego's wrong-doing. By the time it was all straightened out, Mego had lost its credit line and was forced to go out of the toy business. The company was sold as a shell for all the tax loss credits it contained.

Marty Abrams scarcely missed a beat. Stephen Hassenfeld of Hasbro bankrolled his new company, Abrams/Gentile Entertainment, which developed many successful Hasbro concepts over the succeeding years.

The latest project is to bring back *Micronauts* in a new interactive form. More on that subject next issue as AFD's coverage of the 1999 New York Toy Fair begins.



Marty Abrams, ready to unveil the new interactive *Micronauts* figures at the 1999 New York Toy Fair.