

# Kids' Show Makes Spinach Cool

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LAZYTOWN ENTERTAINMENT

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If your kids are suddenly getting active and eating their veggies, you may have a man from Iceland to thank. That man is Magnus Scheving, the 43-year-old creator of the hit show *LazyTown*. Your kids might know him as Sportacus, the super-fit star of the show, who for the past four years has been stealthily persuading children around the world that being healthy is fun.

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*LazyTown* — which is seen in over 110 countries — revolves around city residents who are constantly being tempted with junk food and idle ideas by slothful villain Robbie Rotten. In each episode, Scheving, a former aerobics champion, somersaults to the rescue and outwits the villain with acrobatics and "sports candy" — that's fruit and vegetables to you. The on-screen health battles are accompanied by high-energy Europop, with lyrics that urge young viewers to get active.

## Check out *LazyTown*

The healthy-living message is clear — but not too heavy-handed. "A boy watching *LazyTown* will think it's an action show," says Scheving, "while a girl might think it's a dance program." Fans also love the show's vivid visuals. Shot in Gardabaer, a suburb of Reykjavik, *LazyTown* blends live action, puppetry and cutting-edge CGI backgrounds. Each 25-minute episode costs \$800,000 — four times the average budget of a kids' show. It's a price worth paying. "By 2015, there will be more than 700 million obese people worldwide," says Scheving. "It's vital to

motivate families to make healthier choices."

Motivation has never been a problem for Scheving. He started his first job when he was five, running messages to residents of his hometown who didn't own phones. In his early 20s he worked as a carpenter — Scheving proudly boasts that he built his own house "from scratch" — and taught fitness in his spare time. Then, when he was 25, Scheving made a life-changing bet with a friend: they gave each other three years to excel in a sport they'd never tried before. "I chose snooker for him, and he picked aerobic gymnastics for me," he says.

It ended up taking Scheving a little longer to meet the challenge. But five years after making the bet, he won silver at the 1994 World Aerobics Championship, and gold at the 1994 and 1995 European Championships. (His friend was crowned Iceland's snooker champion in 1993). As a sporting celebrity, Scheving was booked to deliver motivational talks across Europe. And it was while he was lecturing adults on the need to stay fit that Scheving spotted a gap in the market: "I realized that nobody was acting as a healthy role model for kids."

He started his one-man-campaign for kids' health in 1991 with the book *Go, Go, LazyTown!* It became a best-seller in Iceland, and other *LazyTown*-branded books, stage musicals and a 24-hour radio station soon followed. After 10 years establishing the brand in Iceland and Scandinavia, Scheving decided to approach Nickelodeon with the idea of a TV show. He wowed Nick exec Brown Johnson — now the network's president of animation — with an exhaustingly acrobatic pitch. "Magnus walked into the meeting on his hands. We talked for a while about the show and then he started to do mid-air splits, and one-armed push-ups," she remembers. "I thought, 'You're amazing, I need to have this show.'"

*LazyTown* has gone on to win millions of young fans around the world, but its impact has been felt strongest in Scheving's native Iceland (pop. 300,000). In 2004, a Sportacus-themed healthy eating drive saw fruit and vegetable sales skyrocket by 22%. The country's Surgeon General has even credited the show with halting the rise of childhood obesity. " *LazyTown* is the most brilliant tax-saving phenomenon," Iceland's president, Olafur Grimsson, told TIME. "The chance of these children developing obesity-related diseases — which place a burden on the health system — has been greatly reduced."

Still, Scheving knows there's only so much a TV show can accomplish. "You can be a good role model for kids, but if there are no healthy, affordable products in shops, you won't change anything," he says. And so, whenever Scheving isn't filming, he travels the world, urging retailers, governments and NGOs to tackle the obesity epidemic. In March, he visited nine countries in 11 days, and held meetings with Wal-Mart execs, heads of state and health ministers. Cookie monster, your days are numbered.