

...Action man: The world of Sportacus

To millions of children he's a hyperactive, inspirational pin-up. And now he's bringing his clean-living message to the West End stage. Ed Caesar gets a rare audience with Sportacus – and an even rarer chance to step into his shiny blue training shoes

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He calls himself a "slightly-above-average-hero", but he's being modest. Sportacus, in anyone's book, is a superhero. Could you walk on your hands, perform a one-handed press-up, back-flip over walls, or do the splits in the air? Not likely. Could you banish the dastardly Robbie Rotten from LazyTown? Didn't think so. Could you wear a villainous moustache, head-to-toe blue lycra, and a swimming hat, and still appeal to children? Exactly.

If you haven't heard of Sportacus that's because you are over the age of six. But to millions of children in the 109 countries where his hit TV show LazyTown is broadcast, Sportacus is an cultural icon.

In Britain, where LazyTown airs on BBC, CBeebies and Nickelodeon Junior, up to a million rapt children (and some befuddled parents) tune in every week to watch the adventures of Sportacus and his right-hand girl Stephanie confront their evil nemesis, Robbie Rotten. Moreover, they absorb the moral of the show – to eat "Sports Candy" (what grown-ups call fruit and vegetables), to have fun, and, most importantly, to exercise.

Such is Sportacus' impact in his native Iceland that he has single-handedly begun to reverse their child obesity crisis. Indeed, one initiative by the programme there saw sales of fruit and vegetables rise by 22 per cent in a week. Now Magnus Scheving – LazyTown's 42-year-old CEO, creator and writer, who has played Sportacus since its TV debut in 2004 – is a man with the ear of government ministers the world over, including our own Public Health minister Caroline Flint.

Scheving flew into London last week for a single day – a meeting with the German Health minister precluded a longer stay – to oversee an important task. He had to choose the man to play Sportacus in the new British stage production: LazyTown Live. Hundreds of young British men had applied for auditions, but there could be only one Sportacus. I had to give it a shot.

"Could You Be The Next Sportacus?" read the advert. I didn't know. Could I? Here were the pros and cons. On the plus side, I'm tall and blond. If the makers of the show wanted to bring Sportacus back to his Icelandic roots – and there was no indication from the advert that they did – I could be the perfect candidate.

On the downside, I work in an office. I have never done the splits, airborne or otherwise. I can't back-flip and I can't walk on my hands. On my only attempt to perform a one-handed press-up, I put my back out. And my Icelandic accent makes me sound like Borat. Still, LazyTown is all about the positive thinking beating negative, and action beating inaction. With this in mind, I packed my tracksuit bottoms and made my way to Piccadilly Circus, ready to fulfil my destiny.

At the stage door of the Criterion Theatre, I was confronted by Julian, one of my competitors, and immediately realised the enormity of my challenge. Julian was a good-looking young man who, it was easy to see from his tight-fitting, sleeveless outfit, was in prime physical condition. His upper arms were roughly the size of my upper legs, and he seemed to have something approaching a 16-pack in his abdominal region.

So Julian was a beefcake. More worryingly, he was singing. Indeed, with sheet music in hand, Julian seemed to be putting the finishing touches to a musical number called "Bing Bang: Time To Dance", the catchy, Europop ditty that had been a big hit for the LazyTown team at Christmas. Clearly, a performance of "Bing Bang" was part of the audition. I had not prepared a performance of this song.

Added to these serious misgivings was a gentler, nagging fear. Where were the other auditionees? I had expected an X Factor-style queue of freaks and wannabes snaking out of the door of the Criterion, waiting for their tilt at glory. Instead of this, there was Julian, and me. This eerie sensation was cleared up as soon as I got into the main auditorium – where assorted producers, directors, and the original Sportacus waited to be impressed. "Oh, we had the first auditions a few weeks ago," said Ed, the floppy-haired co-producer of LazyTown. "We're down to the final three now. And then we'll see you."

After my audition, Magnus Scheving and I took a seat outside the theatre, on the steps under the Eros fountain. He looks nothing like 42 years old – a lifetime of eating sports candy will do that to you – and, with his white jacket, blond hair and clean-shaven face, nothing like Sportacus. He also has perfect English (except for an endearing tendency to pronounce "gymnastic" with a hard "g") and an obsessive tendency for lists.

Nothing is right in Scheving's head until he can number it and put it in a list. There are, he says, "three elements" to being a footballer (athletic ability, technical ability and knowledge of the game); four elements to being a gymnast (just add flexibility); and five elements to being Sportacus – (you have to do it with a smile.) All parents want "seven things" for their kids, (including "maybe they tidy their room"). And, apart from Sportacus, "there is only one other children's hero with a moustache" (Zorro).

This rigour has served Scheving well. He grew up wanting to be an architect in the small Icelandic town of Borgarnes, but initially found work as a builder and carpenter. These skills would come in handy when Scheving decided to build his own house from scratch – laying every tile and brick – where he now lives with his partner of 17 years and three young children.

When Scheving was in his early twenties he made a bet with a carpenter friend of his. "The idea was, we had three years to be a champion in a sport which the other one chose," says Scheving. "The only rule was, you were not allowed to know anything about [the sport] you were given. He chose for me aerobics. I chose for him snooker."

No records exist of how his friend fared at snooker, but Scheving became a Nordic and European champion and a World silver-medallist at aerobics, a sport in which competitors are judged on their ability to perform highly complex "jumps". In 1994, he was named Iceland's "Athlete of the Year". As a result of his triumph, Scheving landed himself a chat-show in Iceland, and began to tour the world giving motivational health-related speeches. "I travelled to 52 countries and did 400 speeches," says Scheving. He stops short of listing them.

Where did the idea for LazyTown come from? "It was 16 years ago," he says. "I saw that there were no role models for health for kids. So I created LazyTown. That's it, basically. It started as a book, and then it was a musical for four years, so we knew that these characters worked really well. All before we started doing it on TV."

LazyTown, which is filmed in HDTV, is, by any standards, extraordinary television. It features "real-life" characters – Robbie Rotten, Stephanie and Sportacus – who interact with CGI-generated characters in a whirligig of action, special effects and strange noises. LazyTown concocts this maelstrom at its own headquarters, a purpose-built studio outside Reykjavik, which features a huge green screen, a 27.6 million-pixel Viper FilmStream Camera and a 70-terabyte processing unit that has to be kept at precise climactic conditions so that it doesn't explode.

The show costs \$1m (£500,000) an episode – about five times the average cost for a children's television programme – and is, says Scheving, "the most expensive children's show in the world". So impressive are LazyTown's special effects that the studio recently received a visit from Quentin Tarantino, who was, says Agust Ingason, LazyTown TV's executive vice-president, "totally amazed."

But there are other impressive studios, and there are other expensive shows. But not all have had the resonance of LazyTown. There's something about its premise, and its unique hero, that has made an impact in the toy-strewn living rooms of the world. What is it?

"We don't preach," says Scheving. "I knew I could make an educational programme. But I wanted it to be entertaining. I just wanted it to be fun. I wanted it to be a good tool for parents to raise their kids. Kids shouldn't be made to exercise – they should just be allowed to play. So you should never say to a kid, 'Come on, let's play tennis so we all get great thighs.' You should just play tennis, and the great thighs are a bonus."

"Sportacus is also a 'slightly-above-average-hero'," says Scheving. "That's important. Kids don't want to say 'I am Mickey Mouse'. They want to be a real character. They want to be Spiderman, Batman, or Sportacus, because they are real characters."

But why make Sportacus look like a villain?

"The moustache? All villains always have moustaches. No nice guys ever have moustaches. So, firstly, I wanted to break the mould. But also... what I found, from going around the world, was that kids who come from a small village, who have no money, no nothing, they can draw a moustache on themselves with a pen, and suddenly, they are Sportacus. They can put a hat on their head, and they are Sportacus. I wanted it to be so easy to imitate that any kid from Brazil or Mexico could do it."

Scheving is fond of Britain. His show is going great guns here. He also likes the fact that the British media puts pressure on the Government to act on issues like child obesity. He admires Jamie Oliver's school dinner campaigns, and says he will meet the chef later in the year to discuss what they might achieve together.

"He has done great things," says Scheving. "He's said, 'Here is a problem, let's try and do something about it.' With LazyTown, we try and approach things differently by using entertainment, but the goal is the same. He actually deals with much older kids than I do. He does the 10-plus age, and I do seven years old and younger. I think it's hard to educate kids after they get to 12 years old."

At his recent meeting with Caroline Flint, meanwhile, Scheving talked about getting "sports candy" – branded with LazyTown's TMG ("Think, Move, and Go") logo – into "every store in Britain." This is ambitious, but, like much in Scheving's career, you wouldn't bank on him failing.

As for Scheving's own career as the on-screen Sportacus, he concedes it will have to come to an end in perhaps, five years or so, when he turns 47. The next TV Sportacus will have a hell of an act to follow. Could he come from Britain? "Possibly," says Scheving. "Maybe we just saw him."

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The auditions are in full swing. In the auditorium, Magnus, the directors, the producers, the musical directors, and me, watch Julian

perform his athletic routine. The hardened professionals in front of me make firework-crowd noises as Julian performs four back-flips across the stage, followed by mid-air splits, box splits, hand-stands, press-ups, and one high kick. Only one?

"Sorry," said Julian, "I strained my hamstring eight weeks ago, and I'm a bit worried about it."

Julian follows this up with a flawless rendition of "Bing Bang: Time To Dance" (sample lyric, "Bing, Bang, diggeridong/ First thing that I say after I wake up"), and then a little acting/crowd-participation routine that has his adult audience behaving like infants.

"Great, thanks," says Ed, the producer. "We'll definitely be in touch." Magnus hums his approval. Was that the new Sportacus, I ask? "We'll see. He is good. He has the personality, which I like, and he can do all the athletic things, which I like. We can teach him the tricks later. So, maybe. But, we have not seen you yet..."

There's a short delay before my audition. A five-year-old boy called Oliver has turned up. He's a big fan of the show, and has asked if he can audition to be the new Sportacus. The creative team, warm-hearted fellows that they are, welcome him in, plonk him on stage, and smile beneficently.

"Have you prepared a dance routine?" asks one.

Oliver nods.

"Can you do handstands?" asks another.

Oliver nods.

"Great, off you go."

To the sound of "Bing Bang: Time to Dance", Oliver gets going. He's good. Really good. And, with a little help from Magnus, who leaps up on stage to help him, Oliver performs his superhero routine effortlessly, complete with handstands and press-ups. At the end of the routine, Magnus gets on his knees, ruffles Oliver's hair, and gives him a hug. There's applause all round, before Oliver's shoed on his way with a signed photo and a happy memory.

It's my turn. I swing my legs up on stage and feel a slight strain in my groin. The producers smile beneficently.

"Have you prepared a song?" asks one.

I shake my head.

"Have you prepared a dance?" asks another.

I shake my head.

"Can you do handstands?" asks another.

"No."

"Right, let's start with 'Bing Bang', then."

And so I sing the "Bing Bang" song with as much gusto as my deep embarrassment will allow.

"Hmmm," says the benevolent musical director. "You've got the tune, but let me feel the energy! Come on, really deliver it to the circle!" The intro comes round again. I feel like an unmusical child being forced to sing for his uncles at Christmas. Still, I try to let the audience feel the energy. Magnus is impressed. "That was fifty per cent better. That was OK," he says.

Singing is my best discipline. The worst is still to come. The producers hand me a script, in which I am required to whip up the rabble with the following words: "Wow, kids, you look great! Do you want to learn a superhero move! OK! Put your hands up! Arms to the side! Knee up! And go! [Their exclamation marks]" What's more, all of this has to be delivered in an Icelandic accent.

I give it a try. It doesn't go well. I sound a bit Kazakh.

"It's a bit... wooden," says a producer. "Try it without the accent. It's just a bit lifeless. You're in your own space – you've got to really engage us..."

"You sound a little like you are in the army," adds Magnus. "Kids have their parents and their teachers to tell them what to do. Try to make it exciting."

I try, and fail, to make it more exciting, and succeed in sounding quite creepy. Magnus does concede that my second attempt was much less military, but Ed the producer has seen enough. He raps the back of a stalls seat with his hand.

"Yup, OK, there, thanks, that's..." he says. "That's probably fine, thanks." Should I expect a call? "No." I give the producers a smile, but they can see I am disappointed. Magnus takes over. He whips out a Sportacus postcard from his bag, scrawls a message on it in black marker pen, and hands it to me. It says "Thank You. Sportacus." Suddenly, everything's better.

LazyTown Live is on tour from October until August 2008. Tickets are available through Ticketmaster

Sportacus

Sportacus is LazyTown's super-healthy action hero: a fit, agile acrobat capable of lightning-fast moves. He hovers over the town on an airship, and when alerted to trouble by a crystal on his bright blue uniform, cartwheels and flips down to the ground to save the day. His mission: to make the idle children of LazyTown happy by encouraging them to eat healthily and get active. Sportacus' Kryptonite is sugar: the merest grain instantly saps all his energy. The only antidote is plenty of "sport candy" (fruits and vegetables), which he encourages LazyTown's kids to eat instead of sweets and junk food.

Stephanie

The right-hand woman of our hero, Stephanie is a bubbly optimist who always wears pink and sees life as one big adventure. Moving in with her uncle, Mayor Meanswell, she loves her new environment but is shocked by the indolence of her couch-bound friends. Holding by her motto, "there's always a way!" she helps Sportacus drag her peers away from their computer consoles and packets of sweets. The show always ends with Stephanie performing a song and dance routine to 'Bing Bang', LazyTown's theme tune.

Ziggy

The zany one. Stephanie's arrival in LazyTown inspired Ziggy, who had been obsessed by sugary treats, to change his habits. Now he's always the first to embrace a new idea or say 'yes' to an adventure. He idolises Sportacus and hopes to shed a few pounds so he too can be a superhero when he grows up. The life of the group, Ziggy's goofy enthusiasm constantly cheers up his friends, but he's still easily distracted by sweets and is usually seen with a lollipop in his hand.

Bessie Busybody

The local gossip. If there's something Bessie doesn't know about LazyTown, it's not worth knowing. Usually seen with a mobile phone clamped to her blue-grey bouffant, Bessie leaves no stone unturned in pursuit of tittle-tattle. Motivated by a desire to be respected, she tries her best to act as a mother figure to the children but her efforts usually appear condescending. Her ultimate goal is to be the queen of LazyTown. She displays no interest in Mayor Meanswell, who pines after her, but she never discourages his advances.

Trixie

LazyTown's resident rule-breaker, troublemaker and free spirit. Trixie is a feisty, in-your-face bag of mischief: she loves playing pranks, such as drawing moustaches on posters of the mayor, and rejects convention at every opportunity. Opinionated, strong-headed and very clever, she can often be brutal, and regularly rubs fellow LazyTowners the wrong way. But her unrestrained personality masks insecurity: her greatest fear is not being part of the group.

Stingy

A spoiled child. Stingy's main concerns are his possessions, especially his car and piggy bank. He impatiently dreams of amassing enough stuff to one day rule the world, and breaks into fits of jealousy when others get new possessions that he doesn't have. Annoyingly, he often has just the tools to allow Stephanie and Sportacus to save the day, if only he'd share them. Jealous of Trixie's leadership ability, covetous of Pixel's gadgets and confused by Stephanie's lack of concern for material things, Stingy struggles to fit in.

Pixel

The nerd. An electronics whizz-kid and slave to all things techie, Pixel has built a gallery of gadgets to help him avoid doing things for himself, including a machine to tie his shoes and a do-it-all remote control he carries in his pocket. But hours in front of a computer screen mean he struggles to relate to real people, and he retreats to his byte-sized world when he realises he can't program his friends. He has a huge crush on Stephanie but tends to short-circuit when in her company.

Mayor Milford Meanswell

A local patriarch. Mayor Meanswell loves everything about LazyTown and is a nervous wreck thanks to being frantically overwhelmed by his duties: he regularly doubles as the librarian, postmaster, banker and shopkeeper. He has a secret crush on Bessie Busybody but his efforts to woo her usually end in disaster. Despite his mistakes, the kids look up to him, and he loves his niece Stephanie more than anything, often calling Sportacus for help if she feels sad or depressed.

Robbie Rotten

The baddie. Spying on the people of LazyTown from his underground lair, Robbie Rotten is determined to keep the town as quiet and lazy as it was before Stephanie arrived. As a master of disguise, Robbie Rotten lures Sportacus into a series of nefarious traps, doing all he can to keep the local kids playing computer games and eating junk food. With the help of Stephanie and her friends, in the end Sportacus always comes out on top. But only just.