

Magnus Scheving: He is Sportacus. And he wins every time

The Icelandic creator and star of the hit children's TV show 'LazyTown' thinks he can make all kids love sport and eat healthily. Truly, a job for a superhero

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Magnus Scheving as himself

Taking your son to meet his hero is a deeply depressing thing to do, particularly if that hero can walk on his hands. Or do press-ups with one arm. Or the splits in mid-air. Magnus Scheving does all these things for a living as the hero of LazyTown, a phenomenally successful television show for children that is seen in 120 countries and is very big in our house, although seven-year-old Joshua doesn't recognise him at first. "It's true," says Scheving, dressed in jeans and a fancy shirt, when he is usually seen in blue Lycra and a false moustache. "I am Sportacus. Watch."

The tables are cleared at the private members' club in London where we are meeting and Scheving leaps up with unseemly energy (he is 44; he should need a winch and a written warning to get out of an armchair like the rest of us). Suddenly the soles of his cowboy boots are at eye level. Joshua stares. It's true then. This is Him. The superhero whose manic athleticism on screen has been known to make my boy cartwheel across the room, and inspired Josh to go from couch potato to all-action junior sportsman. I look at his face and realise that look is awe and devotion. Oh God. Got to get down the gym ...

And if the presence of Scheving, even off duty, is a depressing reminder of one's flabby flesh, imagine what it would be like to see his character's hideously healthy face every time you went to the supermarket. Six pack of Stella? Sportacus is watching. Bumper bag of deep-fried onion rings? Look behind you. Well, this nightmare scenario will become reality for the customers of Asda this week when it announces a tie-in with the most exhausting star on kids' telly. You won't be able to get the little blighters around the aisles without their being coaxed into a treasure hunt or a dance contest, or being loaded down with "sports candy". That's fruit and veg, to those without children. Sportacus is a relentless pusher of the stuff. He's relentless all round, in his determination to get into the lives of our young people: besides the Asda blitz and the TV series there is a live show touring the country, and the British company FitKids has just relaunched hundreds of its clubs as LazyTown classes.

"We are expert in reaching young children," says Scheving. The former aerobics champion devised LazyTown as a way of getting kids to eat right and leap off their sofas for fat-burning fun. (And as a way of making money, even though he prefers to talk as if running a charity.) The health minister in his native Iceland credited the show with reducing childhood obesity in his country and sending sales of fruit and vegetables soaring. As a result, governments in Australia, Latin America, Scandinavia and Europe have enlisted Sportacus for public health campaigns. No wonder British politicians were all over Scheving last year.

First, David Cameron appeared to suggest Sportacus would be the star of new Tory health policies – an idea quickly shelved when Scheving's company pointed out nothing had been agreed. "David Cameron is not in power," says Scheving. "There is not a lot he can do at the moment."

Labour MPs who accused the Conservatives of trying to exploit a children's character then found out the Government was doing the same. "We spoke to the health minister; she really wanted to do something. Then they changed health ministers. We laid out the plan again and they loved it." Then what? "Nothing."

He feels used and snubbed and condemns the Government's £8m Change4Life health campaign as a waste of time. "I disagree with it. I don't think it's working. It is focusing on obesity, with scare tactics. That's not going to reach kids."

"If I say I am going to take you on vacation and you're going to be robbed, you're going to be sunburned, you're going to be bitten by a mosquito, you don't want to go there. Nobody wants to listen to that. You want to see the beach, see where you're going." So? "Don't talk about the problem, focus on the solution."

Scheving also says the Government is targeting the wrong ages. "They're going for older children and parents. We have to say that everybody who is above seven is already lost." Of course, he would say that. LazyTown is aimed squarely at the very young. Like Joshua, who is watching every word and idly doing a little trick, raising himself by his arms on the side of the chair so that he seems to hover, then lifting his legs out in front of him. Scheving copies him, but lifts his legs up to a 45-degree angle. "Can you do that?" Joshua can. "Oh, you are the next Sportacus," says Scheving with a grin, sucking up the adoration. Swine.

He sees that look a lot. "I go to three countries a week. I try to see 5,000 to 12,000 kids a month." The figures make me suspicious. Perhaps sensing this, he offers a tear-jerker. "There was a little kid dying of cancer once. His parents phoned me and said he loves LazyTown, he

lives for it. I said I would go to see him in New York, and I asked what he would like me to bring him. He said, 'I want one sports candy.' So you're flying halfway round the world with an apple in your hand and you realise it's not a TV programme. It's more than that. It's a responsibility. It must have integrity. It is my life's work."

Dry your eyes. Scheving must be loaded, surely? "I thought of myself as a rich man even when I had no money. Money can come and go. You can see that now." Ah. He lost a fortune in the Icelandic crash then? Er, no. "The crash touched everybody, but it didn't touch LazyTown as a company because we were not in that currency. LazyTown is still one of the golden eggs of Iceland."

It employs only 43 people directly but hundreds more are connected via global franchises. Scheving keeps foreign currency coming in to his nation, which it seems is collectively furious with our Prime Minister.

"People in Iceland want to shoot Brown," he says, losing his Danny Kaye smile. "What he did and said about Iceland damaged the country more than any politician has ever done."

Brown used the law to freeze the assets of the banks that owed so much to British people. "He put a terrorist law on Iceland. This set general, hard-working people back years in their finances. Ruined them, basically. It was a huge thing. They would like to shoot him."

Scheving has his own idea. "I wish I could speak to Brown as Sportacus. If he would meet me, we could go for a jog." That would finish Gordon off.

Sportacus was the result of a bet with a friend, after they challenged each other to become champions at sports they knew nothing about. (Were they in the pub? "No. I have never tasted beer. My friend became champion of snooker in our country. In three years I was European aerobics champion and came second in the world.") Having done that he saw that children "didn't have a role model for fitness. Only Popeye, who smokes and hits people." He also saw that attitudes to health were changing, and went for the gap in the market. Sportacus began life as a gymnastic elf in a book, then a musical, then a television series. Filmed in a purpose-built studio, it is the most expensive television show ever made for children, at a million dollars an episode. The pioneering mix of live action and computer images attracted Quentin Tarantino to fly over for a look.

Scheving has control over everything. This, he says, is his vice. He doesn't smoke, having decided young to save the money and spend it on a Triumph TR3 he still drives (when not using the Porsche or the vintage Mercedes). "I can be really demanding. I like details. I ask for excellence. To work with me is difficult."

He once trained as a carpenter and still lives in a house in Iceland that he built "between 10 and midnight every night for three years", with his wife and their three children. Living up to his own role model is sometimes not easy. "You're gonna meet all the mums and dads in the shops. If you do anything bad for kids, they're gonna kick your ass. They know where you live. It's difficult for me: if you're a superhero all day then you come home and you're not, even your wife complains." We all know that feeling. But Magnus Scheving has found a lucrative way to make children, parents and governments happy. His marketing muscles are beefier than his biceps, and that's saying something. Sorry Joshua, but I (and every unfit, undriven father in the world) will never be able to say: "I'm Sportacus." But there is one offer

I can make that he never will, and I have the urge to do so now. So, son ... fancy a McDonald's?