



Less couch, more potato: Magnus Scheving, creator and star of LazyTown, credited with halting childhood obesity in Iceland. Picture: Bob Finlayson

Sportacus drops the schtick for carrot

- *Amanda Meade*
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IN Iceland children scamper off to bed eagerly at 8.08pm because that is the time their hero Sportacus retires in the hit television show, LazyTown.

Young fans of the show happily eat apples and carrots - which Sportacus calls "sports candy" - because it will make them strong and agile. One of LazyTown's public health campaigns resulted in the amount of vegetables consumed rising by 22 per cent in a month.

The Icelandic Surgeon General credits LazyTown with halting the rise in childhood obesity for the first time in 10 years.

The man behind Sportacus is world-class athlete, writer and motivational speaker Magnus Scheving, who has already packed dozens of careers into his 42 years. A father of three who employs 163 of the 307,261 people in Iceland, Scheving is making a flying visit to Australia this week for talks with licensing company Gaffney and the Australian carrier of his show, Nickelodeon.

"I am like a man on a mission," he says. "I have never been driven by money. I understand what kids love. I understand that kids love detail. When they are four years old they understand every detail right down to the glitter on a headband. What is missing in most kids TV is that it is too simple and formulaic. When experts step in they boil it down into categories - for boys and for girls. Why can't it be for both? Why can't it be for boys and girls and their grandmothers?"

A former European aerobics champion, Scheving is the creator and chief executive of global entertainment and marketing company LazyTown Entertainment. It began as a book, *Go LazyTown* in 1991, then a live musical which toured for two years. The show premiered on Icelandic TV in August 2004.

"They don't like being talked down to. They are really intelligent; they learn language quickly. Parents

are all the same around the world too: they want their kids to have education and good health. Even bad parents want that."

Scheving says many of those who make kids' TV have never met any kids. "If you sit with your kids they really change the way you think," he says. "It is really important to know your concept and your customer. So I talked to people in 52 countries at over 4000 live events, lectures and seminars over an eight-year period.

"They gave me a lot of information because I was from Iceland. People thought, 'they don't even have TV in Iceland'."

The spectacular success of LazyTown in its birth place of Iceland is being repeated across the world.

Launched in October last year in Britain on BBC, Nick and on BBC's digital children's branded channels CBBC and Cbeebies, LazyTown has attracted the interest of none other than celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, and talks are under way for a joint project to improve British children's health.

"I think Jamie Oliver and LazyTown fit really well," he says. "We start much younger. We teach kids if they eat carrots they can jump. I can do the movement and Jamie can do the food."

Last month The New York Times called Scheving Iceland's Richard Branson. Australia recently became one of 106 countries to broadcast the unique show, and it has become an instant hit with children here too.

Screening locally on pay television channels Nick Jr and Nickelodeon, LazyTown is a vibrant mix of live action, CGI animation and puppets, music and movement. Sportacus is the optimistic hero of LazyTown, living in a pedal-powered airship above the town and coming to the rescue when needed. "I don't think kids should exercise," Scheving says. "They should just move and play. We, the grown ups, have to find an environment for them to move."

Sportacus's arch nemesis is Robbie Rotten, a dark, unhealthy villain who wants the children to eat junk food and be lazy. Robbie is played by Stefan Karl, a classical Icelandic actor, comedian and musician. The only other "human" character is the eight-year-old pink-haired Stephanie, played by accomplished Broadway star Julianna Rose Mauriello, who has been nominated for an Emmy for her performance this year. The other kids in town are puppets and they symbolise the problems children face with selfishness, following rules and making healthy choices. Scheving says: "Parents want kids to follow rules, not to spend too much time in front of the television and the computer, they want them to learn to share things, not to lie and cheat. So I made characters around these things. We never mention it; we act it out. It's not easy. Anyone who has tried to make healthy shows for kids knows that."

Many children's shows these days have elements which promote healthy living. The Wiggles sing about fruit salad and vegetable soup, Sesame Street's Cookie Monster has reduced his intake of cookies - "a sometime food" - and the ABC's Play School often features healthy cooking. But LazyTown is unique. It is a world in which health is the focus.

"When I started out I thought there was not enough attention being paid to kids," Scheving says. "So I thought about what can I do to educate kids about a healthy life. I need a great idea. A great idea is when anything is possible. LazyTown is a concept like freedom. You can't explain it. Little girls love LazyTown because they see a music show and little boys see it as an action show. For parents it's a tool to raise kids. For a teenager it is funny and a little weird."

The production values of the show are as high as any prime time drama, unheard of in children's television. It is filmed entirely in a purpose-built studio in Gardabaer, Iceland, one of the most advanced high definition virtual cinematography facilities in the world. "The latest 18 episodes are not really kids' TV any more," Scheving says proudly. "They are like mini movies for kids. My mission was never to compromise when it comes to kids." With some training as an architect Scheving designed

some of the sets and the crazy, bent look of the town. All the props are handmade, down to a pen.

Scheving is a fan of Jim Henson and of Tarzan, but says Tarzan is a bad marketing tool because he is naked and you can't sell his clothes. Everything about LazyTown is marketable: there are DVDs and videos, apparel, toys, furnishings, accessories, games, books, posters and music. "As long as the characters are popular kids will wear the clothes," Scheving says. "But everything about the show has to have a purpose. There has to be value in a piece of clothing. If there were a LazyTown theme park it would have to be where kids could jump and move. Integrity is the only thing you've got."

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