

# Anything but Lazy(Town)

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- Written by Helen Jones  
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## **Revolutionising kids' fitness**

LazyTown is a kid's entertainment and lifestyle brand with an internationally acclaimed TV show, live theatre shows, music, magazines, DVDs, apparel and merchandise. Not only does that make it one of the major children's brands of the world, but it has a unique competitive edge in promoting a healthy lifestyle for kids. LazyTown's mission includes partnering with companies all over the world – a retail alliance with Asda saw a 41% increase in fruit and vegetable sales.

From day one, all of LazyTown's entertainment products were carefully designed as a vehicle to carry the core health message that the brand is all about. Magnús Scheving, the creator, was motivated by kids and learned from them just how excited they were when they made positive changes in their lives. In 1995, he wrote a book titled Go, Go LazyTown! that encourages kids to be active and healthy by putting forth positive, active role models in an entertaining story. The book became a best seller in Iceland, and everything else evolved from there.

Magnús plays the character of Sportacus on the show – LazyTown's resident action-health hero, who's fit, agile and an amazing acrobat with lightning fast moves. But Magnús himself is an inspiration, as he was the European Champion of aerobics twice in the 90s, as well as silver medalist in the World Championships of aerobics. Furthermore, he successfully built up one of the most popular health and fitness clubs in Iceland.



**So, how did you get into fitness?**

I did all kinds of sports when I was young as I lived in a very small town and there was nothing to do there. I began with running and physical training, then I made a bet with a friend that we had to succeed in a sport that we knew nothing about. I chose snooker for him and he chose aerobic competition for me. That was how it started, and I went on to become the European Champion and then World Champion. My father was a sports teacher so I was always around sport and then I taught for many years, so it's always been a part of my life.

**What kind of impact does LazyTown have on kids?**

Lazytown is now in 128 countries and 500 million homes, and I have had the privilege of meeting 10,000-15,000 kids a month, for the past 20 years, who tell me how great it is.

What's amazing is that if I put on the costume, stand in a street in England, Mexico or Norway, hundreds of kids will come up to me and start moving within 10 minutes. I know that Sportacus and LazyTown have the effect of moving kids, so I think it aligns very well with the mission of Lazytown, which is to promote a healthy lifestyle. I want to move the world – that is the idea.

### **Why do you think other organisations have failed in their quest to get kids active?**

I think it's a combination of a lot of things. Sometimes it's because they have created exercise programmes for kids, instead of games. Football for example is popular with young boys and it's not an exercise, it's a game, and is a bonus that it gets you fit and healthy. I have worked with kids for many years, all around the world, in more than 100 countries, so have learned what appeals most to them. I can't explain exactly what it is, but it's many things mixed together.

### **What is it exactly about LazyTown that gets kids moving?**

Number one is that everything Sportacus does is doable, so kids can imitate it. He's not a cartoon character – most kids don't want to stand up and say "I'm Mickey Mouse". They want to be a life character – they want to be Spiderman, Batman ... Sportacus. I think the fantastic music that features in each episode of LazyTown is a big factor too. It's how we do it; sound effects and playing with words – for example, we call fruit and vegetables "sports candy". The TV show is also really high quality; it's one of the most expensive TV shows ever done for kid. The second thing is that we never mention exercise.

### **Do you think "exercise" should be the forbidden word?**

I don't believe kids need to exercise, at all. I think when a kid gets on a bike they're doing it because they love it and it's fun, and the bonus is that they're exercising. I don't know many kids aged 0-7 who don't want to move, and that's the age group of LazyTown. When you ask kids if they want to go to the cinema, most will say "yeah" and jump up and down, because moving, to them is so natural. It's us grown-ups who are telling them to "sit down", "sit still", "don't move". Of course, the environment, computer games and safety come into play too, and with all these factors, parents are struggling to raise healthy kids.

### **What kind of movement should kids do?**

Kids should do different types, including movement that follows rules, such as line dancing and playground games. A signal needs to be sent to the brain to do certain moves, and if you stop doing that, you stop being fit. You either do it to sound or music or with an object, such as a football or playing golf. If you were to only ever do indoor cycling, you're only using 30% of your skill, because you don't have to think about whether the bike will fall down, watching for traffic, and going uphill or downhill. I believe that kids need to explore opportunities to see every movement that it's possible to make, from dancing to football to swimming. That's our goal, especially here in England with the Olympics coming up and whatever legacy is going to be left behind for kids – but I don't see that right now as it's all about the athletes. Kids shouldn't come second place, and if you work with kids you know that. The decision-makers never really think about kids and it's a pity.

### **Do you think kids aged 0-7 understand the brand?**

I know they recognise the brand. For example 86% of people in England aged from 0-55 know Lazytown. I'm not really sure if kids understand it's about health though, because they don't really understand health in that sense. We say to our kids, "You have to eat this apple to be healthy when you're 21", but they aren't able to look that far forward. So we have to teach kids differently about health than we do with grown-ups. I think aged 0-7 are the golden years. They look up to you, they want to imitate you, they listen to you. After that

you start to lose them a little bit, so it's really important to treat these golden years very, very carefully. As a grown-up you need to think – are there fruit and vegetables around the house? Do your kids see you eating them? Do you drink a lot of water around your kids? Are you on the computer all the time and then tell them they can't stay on the computer? What kind of life is your kid coming into? And what kind of life do you want them to have? For kids and parents to be healthy, is to be in balance. This means you have choices. If you're sick and you're in bed, you don't have a choice. People either train too hard or train too little, work too hard, work too little, sleep too much, sleep too little. Everyone needs to find their own balance and keep that in mind, but it's not easy.

### **In Iceland they measure kids' fitness, unlike here. Is that a good thing?**

I don't think anything should be measured for weight or anything like that, although weight does give a good indicator of what is going happen later in life. There are more people dying of obesity than accidents and cancer combined, and in England 95% of people are going to be overweight by 2050 according to a Foresight report. I don't believe it, but that's what it says. The health system is going to collapse, so it's catastrophic that no one is really doing anything about it. I believe that good health will become exclusive to rich people. The politicians aren't interested in it at the moment because no one will get healthy in five years. That's why the politicians talk about it but it's not really an issue they focus on. So I would say you shouldn't worry kids about obesity or how they look. In my mind, kids should never know about that, but they should be motivated – for example, by telling them that if they eat an apple, they can do a push-up, instead of saying if they don't eat healthily they're going to get fat.

### **What do you think the future holds for our kids?**

I think the gap will widen between kids who are in very good and very bad shape. We should be eating regularly, every few hours, but we don't have the time. We take a 20-minute lunch break and eat a lot, then come home at 8pm and eat a lot again. Everything around us is making us unhealthier, so I would say the future for our kids doesn't look promising actually. It looks like world-wide obesity numbers will go from 300 million to 700 million, so it doesn't look good. But if you start early with a programme such as LazyTown which the younger generation kids are starting to understand, then maybe they will want an apple instead of crisps because they want to do stuff – run faster, jump higher, smile more, and not exercise because of looks. Obesity went down in Iceland and, on the news, they asked the health minister the reason for it – he said “LazyTown”. When I called him the next day, I asked him to write down for me how much impact it had had on the country. So now I'm working with world leaders: Michelle Obama in the US, David Cameron, the health ministers for Germany and Mexico, etc., to help them find a solution for this problem. I'm hoping LazyTown will be a schools programme, in the gym, LazyTown restaurants, LazyTown mini- Olympics, LazyTown cooking show ...

<https://forums.lazytown.eu/articles/-2011-2012/182204-anything-but-lazy-town>