

One should think big

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The point is that resting is not laziness. You are lazy when you have stopped caring about something. In that respect, I'm never lazy." That's how Magnús Scheving, the author of LazyTown, defines laziness. When our request to interview Magnús got the go-ahead, he let us know the most direct route to the gym, as we expected him to do the interview while jogging across town or while he stood on his hands. The reality turned out to be different though, Sportacus suggested a restaurant in the center of Reykjavík.

It probably didn't go unnoticed by many when the media giant Turner bought LazyTown this fall. It is clear that the purchase significantly increases the potential of the LazyTown brand, as television stations such as Cartoon Network, Cartoonito, CNN and TNT are part of Turner Broadcasting. So it was obvious that this energetic business entrepreneur was full of optimism when he sat down with a reporter.

It is common knowledge that you are with busier men and I once heard that you sleep three to four hours a day. Are they exaggerations?

Sure, those are exaggerations. I still admit that I don't always sleep a lot, but that's partly because I travel so much. I use the time on the plane to sleep since these are often long flights so it's no problem. I can actually fall asleep anywhere. I can fall asleep standing in line or at the dentist, and I often fall asleep during a haircut.



LazyTown is simply about getting children to move. Something tells me you weren't a lazy kid. What kind of kid were you?

I've never been particularly good at anything and was pretty average at everything as a kid. As a child though, I always had an awful lot of energy and always have. When I was little, I ran with a telegraph from the age of five to nine. I grew up in Borgarnes and not everyone had a phone there, so I sent telegrams and told people that it was their phone. I often even ran six kilometers a few times during the day, which is a long way for a kid. I remember that I always ate currants that I picked from the currant bush along the way and I still remember the woman who lived in the house by the bush because she was always knocking on the window when I was picking the berries. I literally ate SportsCandy while I ran with the messages.

When the idea for LazyTown was born, did you feel that it could explode as much as reality has, or was it just going to be a children's book here in Iceland?

When I started with LazyTown, I immediately thought: "Can this be more than just a book?" Can this become a brand? Can this be a lifestyle? Can we have a restaurant or an amusement park?". There is certainly a lot on our drawing board at the moment, but initially I didn't necessarily think that I was going to do it all, but I thought more about whether I had the options to do it. I think you should think big in the beginning but take it step by step. It is not good to overestimate, it is necessary to start by winning the district tournament, then maybe you win the Iceland tournament, then the Nordic tournament and who knows but then you will win the European or world championship. It is necessary to think like this because it takes a long time to build a business. The companies or brands that we are competing with now are brands like Winnie the Pooh which is almost an 80 year old brand. We are actually the youngest there.

In recent decades, the Icelandic nation has appeared high on lists of the fattest nations in Europe. Are Icelanders dangerously lazy?

We Icelanders consume a lot of sugar. The candy bars in supermarkets are always crowded and we Icelanders drink a lot of sugary drinks like soda. There isn't that much outdoor time either, because the weather doesn't offer it at all, except maybe in the summer, and besides, less emphasis is placed on physical activity in schools today than in the past. Although many Icelanders take it up in the gym, general physical activity among adults has decreased since before because there is naturally less physical work. Always being in the gym is not exactly the lifestyle of the average Icelandic. Despite this, I am sure that Icelanders will become much healthier, it just takes time. Otherwise, I think it's important that kids should never worry about obesity and how they look. We adults are responsible for this, we buy the food. Retail chains are also responsible, along with food manufacturers, school canteens and politicians. Unfortunately, this is not a good thing since it is determined by a lot of decisions made by a lot of people who are not compatible. No politician is interested in this because health does not appear until several years after the problem is dealt with. The politician just wants your vote today and thinks accordingly.

In the fall, the media giant Turner bought LazyTown and now everything is in full swing for you with the production of the third season. How do you feel about continuing to play Sportacus?

In the contracts with Turner, they made it a condition that I remain CEO and uphold our ideals, but also that I remain to play Sportacus. There was only one thing to do, to go practice, so I went to a practice camp for fourteen days where I practiced twice a day at the same time as writing a script. I just got out of it pretty well and I'm just in tough shape so now I'm totally confident to take another three years on the TV series. However, it can be said that we have many Sportacus men all over the world and many people know Dýri here in Iceland, who has been very good at entertaining all over the country in the Sportacus costume. I think it will be very interesting to do this third series. Turner has actually said that they want to go to series four, LazyTown Movie and then series five. I don't look forward to getting out of the costume anytime soon, but I still have to be careful not to stay in it too long. We hope to find another Sportacus soon. I actually never intended to play Sportacus in the beginning. When we started all this ten to fifteen years ago, no one else was into it. I took it upon myself and now I don't regret it, as a result I have had unforgettable moments with children all over the world. I have therefore learned a great deal from playing Sportacus.



Which of these unforgettable moments should be mentioned the most?

It is of course amazing to experience arriving at the airport in Chile, where thousands of children come to meet you and you walk out of the airport building on your hands. It's amazing to meet two-year-olds in Argentina who know everything about LazyTown. It is amazing to experience that LazyTown is one of the most popular plays Icelanders have ever staged abroad, about one and a half million people have seen the play. In the UK, 40,000 people have turned up over one weekend to see LazyTown, and those are numbers that a world-class rock band could be proud of.

Sportacus is, so to speak, the idol of children all over the world?

Yes, this has also been very rewarding. I have also often been asked to visit hospitals organized by the Make-A-Wish Foundation. I have met some incredibly brave kids there, some of whom only had a few weeks left when I met them. Flying halfway around the world with an apple in hand to cheer up a sick child can really take a toll. The only time I've almost broken down is related to this kind of experience. Then I visited a boy in the hospital and when I arrived he was dressed in a

Sportacus outfit. His doctor had told me that he didn't have much left, but had wanted to meet Sportacus, the boy was then in the intensive care unit and really wanted to show me his room. He showed me his bed very proudly, as it was Sportacus bedding and a picture of Sportacus all over the walls. I spent a whole day with him and meanwhile the boy's whole family was crying and recording a video. It was the most emotional visit I've ever made. We gave this boy Sportacus' shoes and sent him a special 10 crystal, like Sportacus has on his chest, and the boy loved the outfit.

Is Sportacus similar to when you prepared for a tournament in the past?

I've always said that the world championships in aerobics were a really great warm-up for playing Sportacus. I think the times when we recorded 43 episodes of LazyTown were much more difficult than 7,000 world championships put together.

Now there are people all over the world who play Sportacus. Are you all in a team?

Yes, you could actually say that (laughs). All these men have to fulfill certain conditions, this is not easy. If Sportacus smiles too much, he looks stupid, but if he smiles too little, he looks stupid. If he's too muscular, he's probably on something other than vegetables, and if he's undermuscled, he's just a jerk. This is problematic. For example, I trained four in Bulgaria after I saw how popular Sportacus is in that country since 20,000 people came to see it in a shopping center with such force that it had to be closed.

What's the funniest thing you've encountered on a world tour?

I was invited to a Romanian talk show and given a piece to put in my ear so I now understood what the Romanian interviewer was asking me. I walk into the set, there's a live band, an audience in the hall and I even walk in on my hands and sit down with the interviewer. Then he starts talking (bubbling in Romanian), but I only hear a hum in the earpiece and no words except "welcome". There I sat and had to answer about fifteen questions live without understanding a word of what the man was talking about, it was just humming in my ear. Before I knew it, a young guy walked into the hall and I had to get up and walk over to him. Then suddenly I hear the words: "Sportacus! Showdown!". In the same breath, I see my press representative walking out of the studio howling with laughter because it was already decided that this guy and I should have some kind of live duel. This guy was the Olympic Champion in gymnastics from the last Olympics in China. It was absolute horror. When we were driving home from this, the mother of one of the Romanian women calls her and says: "What a good man this Sportacus is. He answered all the questions so well and then let the boy work for a living!" (laughs). I barely escaped around a corner. Since then, this boy, the Olympic Champion, has sent me a letter asking if he can play Sportacus in that country.

The other day you got the Batman costume experts to review Sportacus's outfit, right?

Sure, the idea there was to make the outfit more superheroic so that it had more gadgets and gizmos on it. For example, we wanted him to have a backpack on his back full of equipment, and he's actually become more of an action hero now. We looked at who was the best in the world in this kind of costume design and then got in touch with Ironhead Studios, who have done almost all of the Batman costumes, as well as costumes for the likes of Catwoman and the X-Men. They welcomed us, thought it was very exciting and actually praised the geniuses at Krínolín in Reykjavík who have designed Sportacus' costume for all these years in particular. Then I was measured and plaster casts were made and the costume was made after that. It is of course great to work with such talented actors.



Ironhead Studios created the new Sportacus costume.

Along with playing Sportacus, you are also the CEO. How is that role best described?

I'm a CEO at Turner and I'm probably one of the few CEOs who wears a superhero costume. When you start to build a brand like LazyTown, you run into problems because you have to teach the people around you the way of thinking or the ideal you strive for because no one knows what this is, no one has seen this before. Now I'm so lucky that we've created this world through the books, the plays, the radio, the TV shows and all that, so now it's much easier to get more people to come to all the activities. At first I was creating all this together with other people, but now it has become such that there are many departments within LazyTown that I can't get close to. My main role is to write the stories and lead the creative department with two or three others. Then I take part in promoting the company and formulating the company's plans and goals as well as making sure that all employees are working in sync.

LazyTown is a world-renowned brand. Can you describe to me how well known it is?

The LazyTown brand is one of the best-known Icelandic brands in the world, sooner or later. 73% of people in the world's ten largest countries know the brand. Now LazyTown has spread all over the world to 128 countries, and 500 million households watch LazyTown. The show has been airing in Latin America for nine years, but is still in the top three in terms of viewing figures, which is very unusual. There we have also participated in campaigns or conflicts with the governments of Great Britain, Spain, Mexico and Colombia. This has yielded results, because in Colombia vegetable consumption increased by several percent and the import of fruit from the United States to Mexico has never been higher in seven years. It's a fun brand with a lot of potential.

Of all the LazyTown products that have been produced, from toothbrushes to piggy banks, which is your favorite item?

LazyTown is such that we actually say "no" more than "yes". For example, we can't partner with fast food chains and we can't participate in Easter eggs or anything like that. I would say that I am most proud of the fact that we have come up with the name SportsCandy. We have this brand and kids are starting to use this word all over the world. SportsCandy is, so to speak, another name for fruits and vegetables. We have been running campaigns all over the world related to this product so I would say it is our best.

Would you say that LazyTown is about to claim to be called the capital of Iceland?

No, I don't think so (laughs). LazyTown gets good coverage all over the world and I remember when the BBC said, for example, shortly after the bank collapse that LazyTown was the only good news coming from Iceland at that time. I also feel that when I meet Icelanders abroad, they say they are good at telling people that LazyTown is an Icelandic phenomenon and people hardly believe them, it is very remarkable.

On your world tour, you have met a lot of heads of states and other leaders?

Yes, I have had great meetings all over the world. I have been to the European Union many times, where we are trying to increase the vegetable consumption of children in the European Union countries. I have been invited to the presidency and health minister in almost every country I have been to. I've been to health congresses from places like Tromsø in Norway to Mexico. I have sat in meetings in the White House with Michelle Obama, and with her, LazyTown has participated in a soccer initiative in 23 cities in the United States, and we are planning to set up a marathon in collaboration with her, which will take place in 27 cities in that country. We have worked closely with David Cameron and the UK Health Secretary so I have been to 10 Downing Street many times.



Magnús Scheving does the Superman signature move.

Do you plan to continue working on spreading LazyTown's message into your old age?

Yes, I want to create an organization where I can continue to work on this message myself in some fun way, it's always been about that. So I've always been interested in so many other things. I'm very interested in cars and I'm interested in painting, although I'm actually really bad at it, but I want to get better. I like to ski, but Sportacus has never been allowed to ski, so I started snowboarding a few years ago.

Is Sportacus skilled on a snowboard?

At least I didn't start well, I fell like six hundred times in the mountains and people passed by and pointed: "There's Sportacus, he can't do anything!". So I want to learn more about tennis. Actually, I would like to learn more about how to build a brand.

Do you mean to go to school and sit on a school bench?

Yes, I think it would be fun. Now you have so much experience that I think it would be nice to go through such a study. Then I want to make movies that are not intended for children and I have even written three such movies and am working on them with some good people. It will definitely be implemented at some point, but right now LazyTown is all my heart.

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