

Iceland is a beautiful country, and now we know it also produces beautiful people. LazyTown's **Magnús Scheving** is a case in point. He is a carpenter, world-class athlete, writer, producer and entrepreneur. And what's more: he is one of the media industry's inspirational 'Mr Nice' guys – he has had phenomenal success by staying focused on the greater good of society: raising healthy kids. Gunda Cannon visited him in his lair in Gardabaer to ask him how he does it all

Sportacus rules

Magnús, you are the founder of LazyTown – how did it come about?

I saw fifteen years ago that there was no role model for healthy kids so I set out to create something for that. My challenge was how to make an educational and healthy lifestyle entertaining – and so I created LazyTown. We said to ourselves, let's test it in Iceland for ten years before we take it out of the country – it's one of the few concepts to have made it from Europe over to the United States. It started in Iceland as a book, and then it was a musical and a radio show and took all shapes and forms. After ten years in Iceland we decided to make it into a TV programme and we went and sold it to the US. We built an HD studio in Iceland, one of the most advanced HD digital studios in the world – we can key out green screen live here.



What is the purpose of LazyTown – is it to make you money or to educate kids or help parents?

For me personally it was a challenge. First, I wanted to speak about health, and nobody could really explain health to the general public. What is a 'medium healthy person'? I wanted to create a tool for parents to help them raise healthy kids. It's a little bit like when you go out and play tennis with your son, and then as a bonus you have a great

time. But you don't tell your son beforehand "Come out and have a great time!" because then he will be really bored. My aim was to make it so they did not really realise there were actually moving exercises because kids should not exercise. Then story-wise, there are kids' stories and superhero stories. I wanted to combine them so that you have excitement about brushing your teeth but at the same time a lot of action. And that was not easy. The third challenge was technology. I wanted to create here a state-of-the-art studio, and I think I was able to do this because I had no limits whatsoever – I had never done it before and I just said "I need this and this and this to be done".

How would you sum up your impact around the world?

There is different impact in different markets because we are talking about health. LazyTown as an entertainment is now among the top 5 shows everywhere in the world, we are in over 100 countries. But I would say that from a health perspective, some countries are more advanced than others. In the UK, the media push very hard for solutions from the government. In some countries, the media don't ask a lot of questions, for example in the US. In Iceland, the obesity curve stopped climbing after ten years of LazyTown, and Iceland's Health Minister said the other day that if he had to give one reason he would have to name LazyTown. We are also starting to see an enormous impact in South America, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico. We have millions of emails from people in the US telling us how much impact it has on their kids.

Why do you think it has taken an independent company like LazyTown to do this – isn't this more the role of a PSB like RUV in Iceland or the BBC?

I think it is like with everything, you have to be brave enough to do it, you have to be ready to die for it. I think that is the difference, that there is somebody driving it. It is not the case that you can go home at 5 o'clock. We are the only kids' health brand out there, we are unique to health and wellness, that is our 'shelf'. We have had ten years of practice, and time to do our homework. It is also because we are completely free. The BBC for example cannot sell to Disney, Disney cannot sell to Nickelodeon, so there is a limit in those big companies of where they can take their programmes. I sometimes say Sportacus was born in a balloon so he has no boundaries.

You are the progenitor of the idea, the owner of the company, the director, the writer, the key lead actor – how do you do it all?

I honestly don't know exactly. But I think that you can do many things at the same time. If it goes together like a jigsaw, then it works. The thing about LazyTown is it fits me really well. I can play Sportacus, I can also talk about the philosophy, I have met millions of kids all over





the world. My father was a teacher and my mother a kindergarten teacher so I have that educational background. As an entrepreneur you have to have three things; you need to be a carpenter to know that the foundations come before the roof; you need to be a sports person to tell everybody 'Don't give up before the race is finished – come on guys, let's do one more lap'; and you need to be a number guy as well. I give people ideas – for example parents. No teacher at school ever talked to me about that one day I would become a dad and that I would have the responsibility of raising a child – not one single book I read about it at school. For me this is the biggest task of every human being but nobody speaks about it. For example, you want to teach your kids to ride a bike, to be physical, to learn the alphabet, you want them to have quality time with you, you want to teach them traffic rules and about the environment, etc. You can do all this in 20 minutes. You put your kid on a bike, you have a helmet on, you have a map of your neighbourhood, you have a hangman story, you say we are going to find a word with these letters, and you go and try to find the letter 'K'. You show them the letter K and then you look

for it – and your little kids will find the K for you. You cross the street, you teach them left and right, you come home and you have made the word 'kangaroo'. You jump up and down in your garden, 20 kangaroo jumps, and maybe as a bonus in the evening you go to the library and get a book about kangaroos – you can teach the kids where Australia is. The next time you drive in your car with your kids in the back they will point out lots of 'K's on the way. So how did you teach your kids all this – by doing all those things at the same time. That's what I think I did when I was Sportacus and director and everything else – I did it without really realising.

Is LazyTown as a children's programme going to continue indefinitely?

LazyTown has been in Iceland for 12 years and health is never going to go out of fashion. Raising kids hasn't changed for thousands of years, I think the same values apply today. So I don't think LazyTown is going to go out of fashion, it could be an evergreen property. It needs of course to develop, to movies, to books, etc, and to expand beyond me to educate more people about the LazyTown philosophy. And that is what we are doing. LazyTown is the only TV show shot in HD for kids, and therefore the distribution is going to be more in HD – on broadband, on iPods, on VOD. And that is where LazyTown is very strong, there is nothing else out there. So, no, I am not really worried about the future of LazyTown. The only thing that could happen is that maybe in ten years' time people will say you should never as a producer make a TV show so expensive for kids. Perhaps I was stupid – you can say one million dollars per episode (\$42m for the whole production), maybe that's not wise. But I honestly believe that you should not compromise when it comes to kids.

What else do you want to do?

I look at life as an exercise, I've always done it. In the old days, when you had internet starting and flash animation, there were only maybe four different items they could use and then you could really see who was good and who was not. It's a little bit like giving someone four numbers or a pattern and asking them how many patterns they can make out of all this. That's the good part, to have limited choice, to see how good you are. I looked at LazyTown a little bit like that, as a kid's programme. Kids programmes are in a box, you can only do certain things, others are not allowed. You can't have

explosions, killings, blood, it cannot be sexy, it cannot be daring. But still you have to make it exciting. I want to jump with my staff into the box that has all the other possibilities, that of a movie for grown-ups. It will be really interesting to see what they can do when they get more options. That's what I am training my staff for – well, let's get out there, there are no limits whatsoever.

What do you do when you are not in the LazyTown head office?

I used to relax by running and jumping, then it became my work. Then I used to relax by writing and creating, again it became work as I wrote most of the LazyTown scripts. I thought the other day about what makes me tick. When I have extra time I talk to my family and kids – they are very funny and have given me the most. Personally, I love to read and I try to read 100 books a year because I think you can open different doors for your life. 20% of the books I read I just pick off the shelf in the library without looking – and I find that these 20%, picked at random, are now the most exciting books I read. I always say, anything is possible.

Magnús Scheving, thank you



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