

# From Iceland, With Vigor: 'LazyTown' Hits Chelsea

By BEN SISARIO

Magnus Scheving has a message for the children who watch his television show, "LazyTown," that is evident in every quick swish of his arms, every one-handed push-up, every high kick and backflip.

But just in case that message was not completely obvious, he put it into words at a live appearance before 500 young (and not so young) fans at the Chelsea Piers on Thursday morning.

"I love to move!" he said with wide-grinning delight, just before doing a split way up in the air. His audience responded with a roar and jumped to their feet.

Little did they know that, as they raised their arms and kicked their legs in response to Mr. Scheving's performance, they were getting a carefully planned workout.

In "LazyTown," Mr. Scheving, a native Icelander who is 41 but has the trim, muscular physique and the fearsome flexibility of a star athlete half his age, plays the blue-suited, always energetic Sportacus, the superhero of exercise.

He has an unusual mission for his show, which is seen weekday mornings at 11:30 on Nickelodeon and will have a special one-hour show Monday night at 8. Mr. Scheving wants to encourage children to be physically active and to eat healthy foods — by watching television.

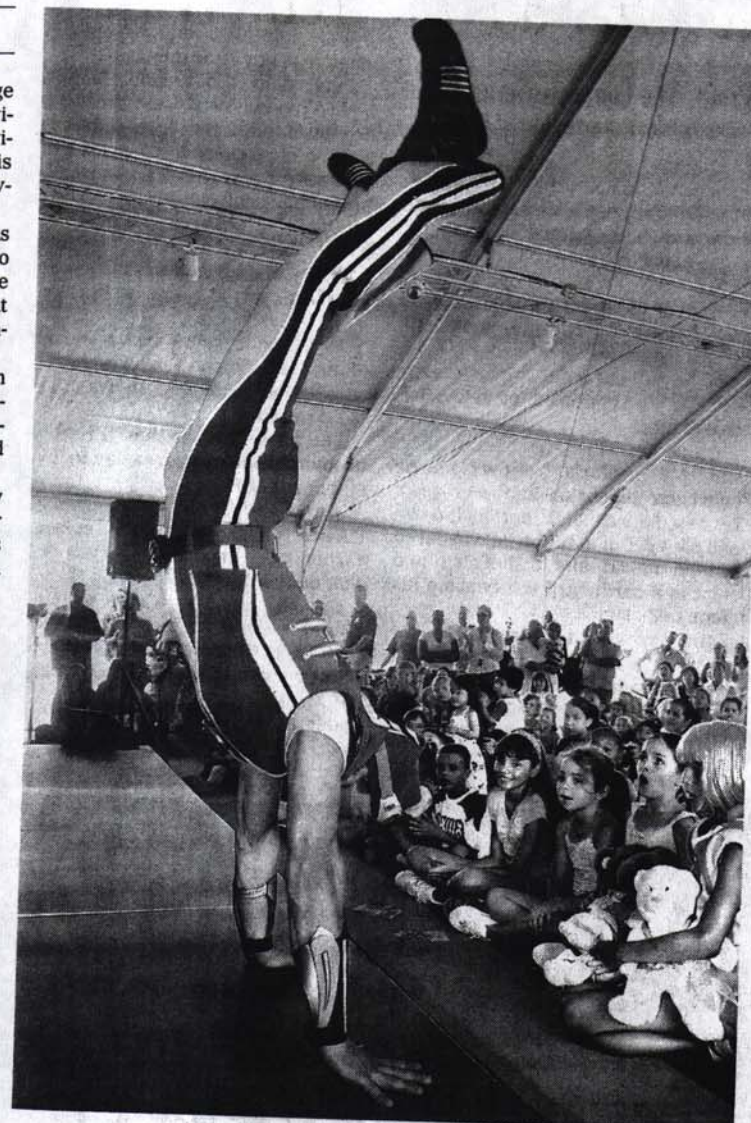
"It's a fact that kids watch TV," he said in an interview at the Nickelodeon offices in Times Square. "But if you think back, when you watched cowboy movies, you would go out and play cowboys. TV and movies motivate people. That's why the whole world did 'Grease' and 'Saturday Night Live,'" he said, striking John Travolta's classic index-finger-to-the-heavens disco pose.

Catching himself, he searched for the name: "'Stayin' Alive'?"

"Saturday Night Fever?"

"'Fever,' yeah," he said, and nodded his head almost as quickly as Sportacus would.

"LazyTown" is constructed to appeal to 4-to-7-year-old viewers, with a kinetic, brightly colored fantasy land populated by live actors and bulbous puppets. In each episode Sportacus comes to the aid of one of the show's resident children, who each have defined health and social issues. Jolly Ziggy, for example, loves candy too



Magnus Scheving, the creator and star of "LazyTown," which is shown on Nickelodeon, was happy to be at Chelsea Piers on Thursday.

much, while Pixel spends too much time playing with computers.

To save the day, Sportacus needs energy, supplied in the form of healthy foods. Carrots, oranges and other fruits and vegetables become his "sports candy." Like any good superhero, Sportacus dutifully reminds his young fans that to do what he does, they must follow his example by eating right, exercising and getting to bed early — at 8:08 p.m., he tells them.

In the special, Sportacus teaches some healthy tricks to his closest

companion, 8-year-old Stephanie, the new girl in town. She wants to be a superhero herself and defeat the show's habitual villain, the sedentary and grouchy Robbie Rotten.

Television is only the newest and biggest forum for Mr. Scheving's enterprise. A lifelong devotee of physical exercise, he first started sweating for a living as a 5-year-old in his small town in Iceland, running to deliver messages to residents without telephones. Years later, as a world aerobics champion — yes, competitive aerobics — he visited schools all over Europe and found a disturbing

trend toward obesity.

To combat this, he began "LazyTown" 14 years ago in Iceland, which became a multimedia empire with stage shows, a radio station and a series of books, each presenting exercise and healthy eating as high-energy, wacky entertainment. When the "LazyTown" cookbook was published in 2000, it briefly edged out the newest "Harry Potter" book on Iceland's best-seller list, and Mr. Scheving beams with pride of accomplishment when he says, "'Sports candy' is now a word that everybody in Iceland knows."

When Mr. Scheving met with Nickelodeon executives to discuss a television version of "LazyTown," his pitch was demonstrative.

"One of the first things he did was a split in midair in my office," said

**In the world according to Sportacus, you must have energy.**

Brown Johnson, the executive creative director of Nickelodeon's preschool programming division. "Then he dropped down and did 400 different kinds of pushups — one-armed, clapping in front, clapping behind his back, in the air, flipping over. I was just dumbfounded not only by this guy's charisma but his ability to do this in front of grown adults and look really cool."

The show, produced in Iceland with technology that allows the smooth combination of live action and animation, was first broadcast last August and has become a hit with the under-11 audience. Each week the show has 4.4 million viewers, and in the third quarter of 2005 it was the fourth-most-popular preschool program, according to Nielsen Media Research.

Mr. Scheving has been traveling around the United States this month performing his veiled exercise routines to promote the series's special on Monday night. Everywhere he goes, he said, children react with enthusiasm to the routines, which he performs in his blue suit and sharp theatrical mustache.

"The same things we did in Iceland work extremely well in Orlando, Chicago, New York," he said. "Kids like to move. They really, really like to move."