



Sport, Health and Fitness

Various persons who hold sport at heart, believe that it is high time that this country grows out of the 'football centric' mentality that pervades the island. The main objection to the present status quo is the fact that many children end up being 'burnt out' from highly competitive football nurseries without being directed to towards other sports.

“Our major concern is that football nurseries might be passing the message ‘you have not made it in soccer’ and this could also possibly translate into ‘you have not made it in sports’ leading to a detrimental long term experience about sports and possibly, also health and fitness”.

We believe that majority of these children who get such a message, could be potential sports champions in other disciplines (there are over 60 different sports disciplines one can choose from). It is also a fact that due to the size of our nation, we absolutely do not afford to 'waste talent' if we are really committed to improving our sports standing in the international sports arena. The crux lies in our national sports strategy and organisation.

As a solution a talent identification scheme in local schools was proposed together with a broader training base of movement and motor skills and the fundamental ABC's which lead to a more holistic physical literacy by the end of primary school for ALL children. Needless to say that primary school students are still far from the desirable goal of ½ an hour of physical activity daily. In practice, most school based physical activity takes place once a week, up to a maximum of twice a week. A government which manages to **guarantee** half an hour of physical activity daily in local schools would be considered to have achieved a milestone.

Also linked to the latter, one particular athlete who also has experience playing competitively abroad, recommended the following:

“Let's start from schools, making it obligatory to keep children practicing sport after school time, each day a different sport so we can give children the chance to understand the sport they like, and to make this more interesting. Competitions should be organised every month so the students have more motivation and something to look forward to!”



We have also received a very practical recommendation from a Physical Education teacher who explained that many schools need to set up permanent structures in school yards to provide shelter from the elements (rain and sun) if an increase in the quantity and quality of Physical Education lessons is expected. From what we could gather many schools lack shading structures in their yards, under which children could have enough space to play or carry out lessons especially at noon when the sun is right overhead. Particular emphasis was placed upon the hotter months of the year (April-June/September-November) when the heat can be literally unbearable and of detriment to students and teachers health alike. As per this teachers view and practical experience, such tent structures will help increase the quality and quantity of Physical Education lessons, since even class teachers would be better motivated to take students down to carry out a PE lesson, if the yard environment helps. At around noon of a recent hot day, this teacher commented:

“Can you imagine a class teacher taking his/her students down for their obligatory PE lesson in this heat? In a yard which does not offer an inch of shaded playing space? Such an action would go against the health authorities guidelines about protection from the harmful effects of the sun. A government who is ‘in touch’ and ‘close to’ what is happening in local schools would commit to provide an adequately sized playing area which shelters students from the elements in EVERY school yard. On certain days the sun is already unbearable by 8:20am.”

Apart from sports and Physical Education lessons, such a structure could also be used in a multi-purpose manner for assemblies and other generic school activities.

As a movement we do also see sports as the real drugs and addictions prevention strategy. There seems to be a strong drive in people towards smoking prevention and the belief in increased incentives for people to stop the habit, including financial, tax incentives or via fitness centre discount vouchers for persons with diabetes, smokers or severe obesity.

Re: smoking and passive smoking. The following is one citizen’s personal experience (an athlete who has a story to tell) in his own words:

“I have lost both parents through cancer caused by cigarettes, so I know. Adults who are addicted to cigarettes are a battle half lost, so we need to target school children, teenagers who have not yet started, we need talks in schools and MCAST showing



students a feature of cancer patients vs. athletes and offering sports as the alternative solution to smoking”.

Another particular citizen asked, can wardens give tickets to anyone caught smoking inside bars, clubs, restaurants - why is it only police that can do so? This is a doable solution which we are proposing, especially when enforcing the smoking ban within towns and villages. Our proposal is that wardens should also be entrusted with such enforcement responsibility. As a movement we are also in favour of the recent change which has made smoking also illegal in hospitals, playgrounds and beaches.

Needless to say that smoking enforcement in Paceville still leaves much to be desired since many persons still smoke incessantly to the detriment of the health of the majority of non-smokers in every club, every weekend. The endless revenue which could be generated from such fines could be directed to a health and fitness fund which could also fund the other proposals within this field.

We have also met a specific athlete who is interested in promoting sports in village streets where streets are closed at specific times or days for kids to play in safely. This is particularly applicable to village core locations. This project could be called ‘street kids’.

Various athletes mentioned the potential this country has in terms of sports tourism. The main complaint though is road safety and road standards for cycling in particular. Running and swimming facilities are acceptable but re: cycling we are still a long way to go and there is a general consensus that this is one of our major infrastructural failures when attracting sports related tourism.

Sport for persons with special needs – the main comment was ‘we cannot forget them’ more awareness about persons with special needs who practice sport is needed. One specific athlete said that he has met various people with special needs who simply need a push to start sports together with adequate facilities and resources. He believes that the government can be that kick start in terms of awareness and increasing participation via for example, wheelchair races. Also linked to the latter, subsidies for fitness centres to purchase specialised equipment for persons with special needs. Such equipment needs to be more widespread and not only located in Marsascala. Fitness centres require more government support to cater for persons with special needs.

Various members mentioned taxing junk food more specifically via a ‘fat tax’. The direction of the proposal seems to lead towards making junk food more expensive and



healthy options more affordable via a form of proactive taxation system which favours and promotes healthy foods.

A fundamental point related to the above is about addressing junk food vans which are strategically parked outside primary and secondary schools doors day in day out throughout the scholastic year, at the start and end of every school day in total contradiction with the educational message which is passed on to students within schools. This reality is being emphasised in line with the reality that this country ranks as one of the most obese countries in Europe. Our proposal is legislation which does not allow doughnuts, 'pastizzi' or soft drink vans up to a circular perimeter or 400 meters around school gates as soon as school starts or finishes. The situation at the moment is truly mediocre and an outright contradiction to the endless hours of work done by teachers within schools.

The setting up of a specific anti-gym drugs squad was also proposed, to tackle the problem of harmful drugs distribution inside and outside fitness centres. Here reference is being made to steroids and other drugs which are sold by private individuals even though these are known to cause short and long term health side effects for the end user. Some fitness centres are notorious for the easy access to such drugs.

Another interesting proposal was to create a 'national fitness clubs/centres committee' which works together with the health promotion department to pass on a national message of health and fitness. This committee could bring fitness centres to work in synch together and create national sports events for all of fitness centre members. An element of organised competition between fitness centres could also be introduced to increase motivation.

Subsidy for gyms to create in-house lecture premises to educate gym members via lectures in collaboration with health promotion department specialists. There was a consensus about addressing the very widespread protein diets which are effective but have detrimental health side effects. Education about this widely used dieting system is seen as very important, since there is a severe lack of awareness.

'Adopt a school' fitness centre synergy between schools and local gyms/fitness centres. This should work in the interest of the students to introduce them to a health and fitness way of life via the most nearby fitness centre from an early age. This synergy could also be linked to the yearly health fun day or sports day.



Another proposal linked to health and fitness looks at the elderly. As a solution, a structure via local councils is being proposed to transcend beyond coffee and tombola outings and/or at least include carefully adapted health and fitness sessions for the elderly.

The only proposal we received about alcohol was the one where since pictorial health warning signs are mandatory on cigarette packets. Why not on spirits and liquors?

Another proposal we received is about government sports facilities. The idea was to have a website that channels bookings for any government sports facility. People would simply check online for the venues available and book accordingly.

There is a growing consensus that investments in the fitness industry pay back not only in the long run by cutting health care costs, but also in the short run, holistically as a country. People's psyche, moods and socialisation opportunities increase thanks to sport, health and fitness. Sport could be a perfect answer to overcoming loneliness, depressions or other psychological or physical conditions.