



FITNESS IS KING

With Malta's alarmingly high rate of childhood obesity being among the highest in the world, LANA GALEA speaks to fitness advocate and inspirational guru, *Sandy 'Spin' Slade*, during her recent visit to Malta about the importance of getting our kids fit... and how we can reverse Malta's disturbing trend.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes childhood obesity as one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. In 2007, an estimated 22 million children under the age of five were overweight throughout the world. In Malta, the epidemic is especially serious, ranking at the top of the list for having one of the highest rates of obese children in the world.

Hailing from the US (the nation from which the increasing spread of obesity in society inspired the famous *Super Size Me* documentary film), Sandy 'Spin' Slade, a former professional basketball entertainer who now works developing products for the physical education market, as well as a motivational speaker and teacher in schools around the globe, knows all too well the vital role fitness has to play in our lives – mentally and physically. Fitness has been an integral part of her life from the very beginning.

"My father was a basketball coach and my family was very active, it was in our blood. So

I was always outdoors and active. It was just a part of who I was," she explains.

"I like the way I feel when I am in shape. I have more energy, my body feels strong, and I feel good. If I don't work out for a couple of days, I can feel it. In a certain way, it's like a drug in a positive sense, because it makes you feel strong and energetic.

"And that's one of the things I try to promote to kids. I feel so good, I want them to feel the same way – healthy, active, and energetic about life – and one way to do it is to keep your body healthy and strong."

And it was Sandy's natural inclination towards an active lifestyle that inspired her, at just 12 years of age, to become an expert basketball handler, allowing her to keep active, while at the same time providing her with an outlet to pass on her infectious energy to others. But even for a kid whose dad was a basketball coach, basketball handling was hardly a conventional career choice.

Still, Sandy, who performed professionally in front of school assemblies and packed NBA audiences alike for 22 years, knew it was the perfect career for her instantly.

"When I was 12, I went to a basketball camp and I saw a lady doing basketball tricks and when I saw her, I said to myself that is what I want to do with my life. What really hit me was the way everybody reacted to her, I wanted to make people feel that way," she recalls fondly.

"By the eleventh grade, I was performing. I think you have to be a little naive to think you can make a living out of doing something like that. I just went into it saying 'of course I can do it, why not?'"

And it is this unrelenting – however naive – drive which spurred the communications graduate with a knack for spinning up to eight basketballs simultaneously, to become involved in motivational speaking.

"Basketball, performing and speaking ►

intertwined. Part of inspiring children was not just through entertaining, but through words. “I sit back and think what do I want to listen to when someone’s talking to me, and I don’t want to hear fact after fact, I want to hear inspirational stories, stories behind a person. “So I always shared with kids personal stories that affected me, and you could always see kids being very quiet when I talked about being criticised because all children have been criticised, and getting excited when I succeeded at something, so they could relate to the stories I presented to them,” she relates with her trademark enthusiasm.

Very few people can boast they have entertained crowds of thousands of NBA and WNBA fans, yet for Sandy, the personal rewards she has reaped from her career as entertainer and motivational speaker go far deeper than the fame and fortune element.

“Just to see kids get excited about having a basketball spun on their finger, or having children come up to me saying ‘because of the words you said and your actions, I will never give up, I will always work hard to try to achieve my goals,’ when they have been inspired by me just spending about 50 minutes with a whole class, that to me has been the rewarding element. And now that I’m not performing, I get a lot of satisfaction in knowing that I’m inspiring physical education teachers and coaches, because they in turn will inspire their children.”

At this point, I get an itching curiosity to know what has been the greatest challenge such an optimist as Sandy has had to face, and her reply is not surprising – nothing.

“I don’t think of things as a dead end, I look at them as speed bumps,” she relates. “My parents always said I could do anything. Even coming from a very small town, they still said there’s a big world out there, if you want to see it, it’s there for your taking. When you have that upbringing, no obstacle is too great.”

And it’s this go-getter mentality that has given Sandy such a strong sense of determination to do her part to tackle the worldwide epidemic of childhood obesity.

Back in her home country, a third of children are either overweight, obese or morbidly obese, and in an analysis by the US federal government in 2008, a study found that 32 per cent of children and teens were at risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and other health issues related to obesity.

But what has been the culprit behind such alarming statistics in the US?

“It’s not only the fitness aspect, it’s also the

nutrition aspect,” she replies promptly. “Life is balanced, and unfortunately children are inactive and are eating too much of the wrong foods. So what the US is trying to do is to take out all the sodas and fast foods from schools, get more physical activity going during school days, and organise after-school programmes which deal with fitness.

“Kids don’t have areas to play in, especially in the city, and parents are afraid to let them out, so kids don’t have home time to play, and that’s where the challenge lies. Educators are trying to teach kids life fitness skills, and are starting to get away from being strictly sport-specific, so that kids can take such skills and use them throughout their lifetime.”

Although witnessing children sipping soft



drinks, slurping on ice-creams and munching on bags of crisps is hardly a recent phenomenon, the real likelihood of coming across a classroom with one or more children suffering from health problems related to obesity these days – such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure – is.

“From all the years I spent in school, I could see the kids getting larger and larger. Technology has increased, meaning kids are now staying at home on their computers. Parents are coming home tired after work and instead of cooking something, they are just buying fast foods. In the past, after school, children just got out, rode their bike and got active, now they have to go to after-school programmes and sit and work again,” Sandy comments disappointedly.

“If we don’t tackle this problem, we’re going to have a health crisis on our hands. Children are suffering from type 2 diabetes from as young as 10 years of age, and it’s all because of choices. Whenever I do a workshop and ask people how many of them know of someone with diabetes, everybody raises their hand. I try to tell people this is not the norm, that we

can actually avoid this.”

But America’s much-publicised dilemma with childhood obesity needs certainly not to be kept at arm’s length from people in Malta because of the two countries’ geographical and cultural differences, nor should it provide the Maltese with the false consolation that their children are safe from landing themselves into the same dire straits if the issue is not successfully tackled locally.

As Sandy points out, the road towards a healthy lifestyle for Maltese children across the board is long, especially no thanks to the startling statistics, but the light at the end of the tunnel can be reached – with some foresight, determination and co-operation.

“I think Malta is really taking a proactive approach into getting kids active. There seems to be so many programmes which are starting off successfully. From an American standpoint, it comes down to what individual towns and schools are doing, as the whole country is not on the same page yet, but because Malta is a small country, it has the advantage of getting everyone on the same page and trying to get everybody pushing fitness and sport,” she says assuredly.

“When I first heard Malta’s childhood obesity statistics, I was shocked. The government is already starting to organise initiatives and programmes with different organisations for kids, but I think more can be done.”

And one way that Malta can turn the tide to a healthier lifestyle for its children is through *Skillastics*. Developed by Sandy, the *Skillastics* programme includes a series of standards-based, fitness games that allow children of varying ages and fitness levels to participate and enjoy being active at the same time, developing confidence, facilitating co-operation, and instilling positive exercise habits that last a lifetime, rather than just during PE lessons.

“The methodology of *Skillastics* will make physical activity a lifestyle instead of just something to do, by making it fun for kids to get active. It is a stepping stone to creating a healthy lifestyle,” she concludes enthusiastically.

And a healthy lifestyle is something which parents, teachers and government alike desperately need to work together to instill in Maltese children, before the current situation gets even worse. **C**

Kunsill Malti ghall-iSport, in partnership with Gamebox, has launched Skillastics in Malta. For further information regarding this programme, visit: www.skillastics.com