

50-hour youth sports challenge is fact finding as well as fun

Over 3000 schoolchildren from disadvantaged Western Cape communities will be doing more than keeping a ball in motion at the sixth annual Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-Hour Sports Challenge, taking place at the West Province Cricket Club in Newlands from Friday 16 (1.30pm) until Sunday 18 September (4pm).

In addition to having a bundle of fun, the young participants will feature in important field research, which will provide information on the state of fitness and obesity in South African school children.



The Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-Hour Sports Challenge, in association with Sporting Chance, is reputed to be the largest sporting event of its kind in the country.

Children partake in up to 15 different indoor and outdoor sporting disciplines over the course of the three days. The participating children are exposed to a huge variety of sports, including cricket, tennis, hockey, rounders, table tennis, badminton, netball, basketball, soccer, squash, rope skipping, athletics and touch rugby.

This year, behind all the fun and games of this annual sporting extravaganza is a serious fact-finding study, a 10-year follow up to the original ground-breaking Health of the Nation study^[1], which first revealed the magnitude of obesity in South African children. The resulting information and statistics will assist health and education policy makers to gauge where we are, so that they can continue steering SA youth towards healthier lifestyles.

According to Brad Bing of Sporting Chance, the youth sports development agency that conceived and coordinates the Challenge and study, while there is plenty of academic research available on adult obesity, there is a lack of current information on how the prevalence of obesity relates to children's health and fitness in South Africa. The 2011 study will assess the fitness and health of a large sample of youth ages nine through 13.

Fitness test

"Every child who participates in this year's Challenge will first complete a fitness test," says Bing. "Testing personnel will measure height, weight, waist and hip circumference, which will provide crucial statistics on the prevalence of obesity and body weight distribution. Then, children will engage in a series of exercises designed to assess flexibility, abdominal muscle strength, lower and upper body strength and agility. These include: sit and reach, sit-ups, standing long jump, shuttle test and a cricket ball throw."



In 2004, data collected by Sporting Chance in conjunction with the UCT/MRC Research Unit for Exercise Science at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa indicated that nationwide, children from all backgrounds showed a tendency toward the onset of obesity similar to that seen in developed countries.

"The genesis of the Challenge was the 2004 study, which revealed the shocking truth about South African children," says Bing. "We found that a large percentage of our children were already looking at probable health problems due to obesity. It was obvious that we needed to kick-start an awareness of the importance of exercise and living a healthy lifestyle, which we hoped would grow into a passion for sport and physical activity."

Fighting the bulge

There are many reasons why South African youth are fighting the bulge. Youth are less active because physical education is no longer compulsory at schools, and at home, exercise has been largely replaced by TV and computer time. Parents, teachers and peers are not always encouraging of physical activity. Other crucial elements are directly related to crime and poor socio-economic conditions: facilities and equipment are not always available or safe, street crime largely prevents children from walking and cycling to and from school, and from playing outside in their own neighbourhoods.

According to biokineticist Nicky Sulzer, who is overseeing the research: "Research conducted on South African school children has shown that the implications of childhood obesity are truly shocking, with 25% of obese children presenting two or more cardiovascular risk factors.

Numerous studies have shown that physical activity has the potential to be a powerful 'agent of change' in the prevention and management of obesity, and getting kids moving is the aim of the Challenge."

Besides giving kids the chance to play new and unfamiliar sports under enthusiastic coaches, the Challenge provides an opportunity to spot new talent, according to Bing. Many accomplished sportsmen have benefited from the Sporting Chance coaching programmes and events, like current England International cricketer Craig Kieswetter; Lions captain Thami Tsolekile and former rugby Springbok Neil de Kock.

Empower children to make lifestyle choices off the field

"Over the past five years the Challenge has grown exponentially," says Sarah Mansfield, corporate spokesperson for the Kellogg Company of South Africa. "In addition to teaching and showing learners how to be physically active on the field, it is also important to empower South African children to make healthy lifestyle choices off the field.



Western Cape Education MEC Donald Grant pictured at last year's event getting a little batting instruction from someone who really knows the game. Herschelle is back again this year, and he's also going to undergo the tests that have been set up.

"In this light, in the weeks leading up to the Challenge, Sporting Chance hosts pre-Challenge road shows in selected communities. The sessions address specific social concerns within communities including how to lead an active life; prevent obesity; principles of personal hygiene and nutritional guidance facilitated by Kellogg's dieticians," says Mansfield.

The Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-Hour Sports Challenge is supported by the national Department of Health Promotion, Western Cape Department of Health, Education, Cultural Affairs and Sport.

"The promotion of sport and an active lifestyle from a young age is very important for the general wellness and well-being of our people," says Theuns Botha the Western Cape MEC for Health. "The Western Cape Department of Health has adopted an approach to reduce the burden of disease on our system, and that is the creation of wellness. In laymen's terms it means that the objective is to adopt an approach of preventing illness, rather than build more facilities for sick people. This government will be spending more money on the building of strong immunity, which can only be achieved by a healthy lifestyle, including sport and recreation. For this reason we strongly support the Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-Hour Sports Challenge initiative and call on all learners to participate in the project. Be healthy!"

The Johannesburg Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-Hour Sports Challenge runs from Friday 28 to Sunday 29 October.

Schools or individuals wishing to participate in the Kellogg's Health of the Nation 50-hour Sports Challenge and research project can contact Natalie at Sporting Chance on +27 (0) 21 683 7299 or log onto www.sportingchance.co.za.

[1] The Health of the Nation research project was analysed by the University of Cape Town/MRC Research Unit for Exercise Science at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa and featured in the *South African Medical Journal*.

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