

For Celtics captain, children's fitness is a very personal cause

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Recalling 'chubby' childhood, Pierce targets obesity

By Bella English, Globe Staff | March 27, 2010

Long before he was Paul Pierce, eight-time NBA All-Star and captain of the Boston Celtics, he was Paul Pierce, the fat kid.

"I like the word chubby better," Pierce said recently at the Celtics' practice facility in Waltham. "A lot of people referred to me as the roly-poly kid."

He took a piece of bright blue gum from his mouth and rolled it into a ball. "See this piece of gum here?" Pierce said. "This is me as a kid." He pulled the orb into a long, slender strand. "It just took me a while to stretch out."

Pierce, who stretched out to 6-foot-7, 235 pounds, said he began to think about how to build his charitable legacy in Boston after winning an NBA championship in 2008, and recently became a national spokesman for the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. A partnership between the American Heart Foundation and the William J. Clinton Foundation, it aims to reduce childhood obesity by 2015. Starting today, a series of whimsical spots will begin airing on Comcast, in which Pierce demonstrates simple exercises to get couch potatoes moving. There he is gyrating with a hula hoop, doing lunges wearing a book-filled backpack, working his triceps by doing dips off of stairs.

As part of his campaign, Pierce has started a "fan club turned fit club" — FitClub34 — for children that features fitness challenges, complete with a green Paul Pierce Activity Watch that tracks a child's activity level. Points accumulate for activity time and can be redeemed for prizes that include Pierce T-shirts, iPods and Flip videocams, a session with the star, or attending a Celtics game in his personal suite. The club is part of Pierce's charitable foundation, The Truth Fund. Like the federal government, Pierce's program encourages 60 minutes of exercise daily.

For the younger, chubbier Pierce, part of the problem was that some of the exercise he got growing up near Los Angeles was walking across the street to the Hostess bread store. "They had Twinkies and cupcakes for 25 or 50 cents. . . . My favorite was the Honey Bun."

Childhood obesity is the health topic du jour, with first lady Michelle Obama making it her pet cause. In the past 30 years, obesity rates have tripled; nearly one-third of children and adolescents are obese or overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In addition, obesity costs the country an estimated \$147 billion a year in weight-related medical bills.

"I struggled with my own weight as a young man and I have seen my family, friends, and community struggle with not having enough opportunities to eat well and engage in physical activity," said Pierce, 32. "Staying active and eating well has been a huge part of my success and I think it's critical that kids understand how important exercise and nutrition are to a happy, successful life."

Even for children glued to the TV, Pierce has suggestions. During commercials, he demonstrates how they can do jumping jacks and squats, or run and jump in place. All the exercises have been vetted by Tufts Medical Center to make sure they're age appropriate and are also available on his new website, truthonhealth.org.

Still, he knows he has got his work cut out for him. Even while scarfing Twinkies and Honey Buns as a boy, Pierce said he was constantly active, playing tag football, dodge ball, and catch with friends, riding bikes or walking everywhere. Children today spend an average of eight hours a day plugged in to electronic media.

After the Celtics won the 2008 title, Pierce wanted to be sure he was remembered as more than a star player in Boston. Last fall, he met another former fat kid, former president Bill Clinton, with his famous weakness for Big Macs. Pierce had been invited to the Clinton Global Initiative, a nonpartisan conference of international leaders that meets annually to discuss — and pledge — solutions to global problems. Pierce paid his registration fee and went to New York.

At first, Pierce said, he was intimidated by all the big names there, including Brad Pitt talking about his housing program in post-Katrina New Orleans. "I remember sweating profusely," he said. As the only pro athlete, Pierce was given the microphone and asked to go up on stage.

"I was with all these brilliant people. I shared what I was doing with FitClub34," he said. "I told them I wanted to be an influence on kids because of the changes I made in my life. I wasn't always a great athlete and I wanted kids to know it."

Pierce committed to increasing his outreach. "Once I was onstage, I started meeting people who shared their ideas. I started networking and really got a great response. It motivated me."

Among those he met were the founders of Switch2Health, a health and wellness company that agreed to make a Paul Pierce Activity Watch to monitor exercise. Pierce — who wears the watch, except during games — has given 400 of them to students at the Josiah Quincy School in Chinatown, and will soon give out 600 more to Boston children. As chief sponsor of Pierce's FitClub34, Harvard Pilgrim helps fund the programs and promotes them to parents, children and employees in its network.

At the Josiah Quincy School, health teacher Tom Myers says he has noticed changes in students' weight, alertness, and energy since they began wearing the watches six weeks ago. "There are not only health effects, but they say exercise is like food for the brain," said Myers.

Fifth-grader Christina Yee wears her watch proudly and has racked up 1,000 points. "I've been running, jumping rope, and playing sports," said Yee, 11. "I think it helps me in school. It keeps me awake and I have more energy."

The other part of Pierce's campaign is nutrition; his website includes tips for children and parents on healthy eating. His typical pre-game meal: grilled salmon, baked potato with butter ("I burn it off") and broccoli. Right before a game, he also downs a peanut butter sandwich and a banana for energy. His 2-year-old daughter, Prianna, loves salmon and broccoli, too. "She wants whatever I eat, it's crazy," he said, laughing. And they both share a liking for chocolate ice cream.

"I can't help it," said Pierce. "I think if you exercise right and eat right it's OK to reward yourself, and that's the way I reward myself, with a nice cup of chocolate ice cream." Once a week. ■