

THE RINGER:

JUMPING HURDLES



Viewers overwhelmingly agree that the movie has positive social impact

by Stephen Siperstein

would take an important step forward in challenging the public's negative stereotypes of individuals with intellectual disabilities. To find out if the movie met this goal, one has to turn to the viewers themselves.

Research staff from Special Olympics and the University of Massachusetts Boston designed a survey to gauge the impact of the film on viewers' attitudes. During the first three months after the film's release, 791 viewers (249 youth and 542 adult) logged onto a Web site dedicated to *The Ringer* and Special Olympics (<http://theringer.specialolympics.org>) and chose to complete the online survey. The overwhelming majority of youth (84%) and adult (93%) respondents liked the movie a lot and thought the movie was very funny. In addition to being funny and entertaining, the film succeeded in conveying an important message: athletes with intellectual disabilities are no different from any other athletes. Based on the survey responses, it appears that moviegoers got that message.

To challenge negative stereotypes and change the public's negative attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities, *The Ringer* set the stage with Uncle Gary, who represents those stereotypes and attitudes. Early on in the film, Uncle Gary says to his nephew Steve, "A normal guy against a bunch of feeb? You'll look like Carl freakin' Lewis out there." At first, Steve does not speak up against his uncle's obvious prejudice. But later in the film, Steve tells his uncle not to use words like "retard," because after getting to know several Special Olympics athletes, those athletes are now "my friends."

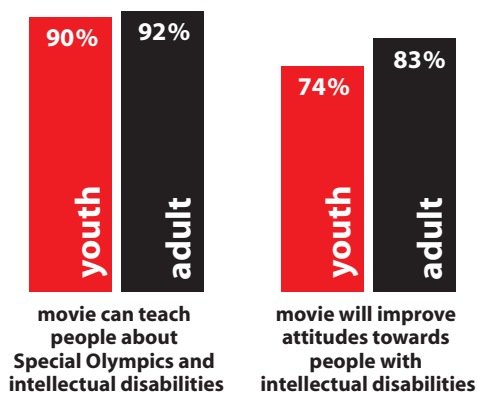
The results are in—*The Ringer* is a winner. The Fox Searchlight Pictures' film, which opened in theatres in December 2005 and was released on DVD this past May, was a success at the box office and in capturing the hearts and laughs of American moviegoers. The movie tells the story of Steve, played by Johnny Knoxville, a man who fakes having an intellectual disability in order to participate in a Special Olympics event and win a bet. While this Farrelly Brothers' movie first appeared controversial, Special Olympics hoped the film

While 67% of youth and 61% of adult respondents were uncomfortable with the use of negative stereotypes, this is overshadowed by the viewers' responses to the film's more positive messages. Most respondents to the survey indicated that they had learned something about individuals with intellectual disabilities and Special Olympics from watching the film, and 90% of youth and 92% of adult respondents perceived the movie as having potential to teach people about intellectual disability and Special Olympics. This tremendous confidence in the educational potential of the film by both youth and adults is a testament to its positive social impact. Even more importantly, 74% of youth and 83% of adult respondents thought that the movie would have a positive impact on the public's attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities.

Like the athletes portrayed in the film, *The Ringer* jumps over hurdles, particularly by casting individuals with intellectual disabilities in many of the lead roles. These actors often outshined the "regular" actors with their onscreen presence. The athlete actors are shown as real people with unique personalities, senses of humor and special talents. This is seen in Thomas' gentle bashfulness, Glenn's joke telling and Billy's computer-savvy and sarcasm.

The Ringer marks an important step in changing destructive attitudes and negative stereotypes about individuals with intellectual disabilities, and helping the public to see them as equals. Because not only are athletes with intellectual disabilities no different from other athletes, but as Steve found out, friends with intellectual disabilities are no different from any other friends. *The Ringer* has jumped the first hurdle. Now, let's go the distance.

Perceptions of the movie, *The Ringer*, as an educational tool



Get Involved — Volunteer!

Special Olympics wouldn't exist without the commitment and enthusiasm of its volunteers. Join the world of Special Olympics—a world full of joy and acceptance; a world without bias, prejudice or false preconceptions!

Here are five simple ways you can make a difference:

- 1. Commit 10 hours and volunteer** with your local Special Olympics or grab some friends and cheer on the athletes at a local competition.
- 2. Become a Special Olympics Unified Sports® partner** and train and compete alongside Special Olympics athletes of similar age and athletic ability.
- 3. Rid the world of "Retard"** by creating a schoolwide "Declaration" against name-calling, encouraging others to stop saying the "R" word.
- 4. Organize a Special Olympics Youth Summit** where people with and without disability can come together to talk about stereotypes, attitudes and acceptance.
- 5. Be a friend to a person with intellectual disabilities.** Take some time and get to know someone with an intellectual disability. Say hello to them at school; invite them to hang out with you.