

## Unlikely leader lifts 'Hoosiers' of Title IX

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From "Hoosiers" to "Breaking Away," pop culture is replete with films about young people using athletics to find recognition and a purpose in life.

Usually, they're about young *men*, because, well, who'd want to watch a movie about girls suiting up and boxing out?

Probably not the folks upset over Title IX, the landmark 1972 legislation that ties college athletic opportunities for men and women to enrollment and is now being given the official once-over. Too bad, because "Rocks With Wings" is uplifting without being manipulative, a true tale of self-doubters and strangers who together succeeded far beyond sports.

You needn't love girls high school basketball, or sports, to appreciate this documentary about the all-Navajo Lady Chieftains coming out of nowhere (Shiprock, N.M.) in 1988 to win the first of three consecutive state championships.

In a town where history looms like the huge outcropping the Navajos call the "rock with wings," these girls soared.

It all started with the arrival in 1980 of coach Jerry Richardson, an African-American ex-high school basketball star from Texas. Recalling the obvious surprise at Shiprock High that he was black (his application hadn't included a photo), Richardson says later, "They needed a teacher, and I couldn't afford to go home. A marriage was made."

Like many marriages, this one struggled sometimes, in part because of divergent backgrounds. "Rocks" is fascinating in showing how different minority groups often experience life's similar challenges differently.

Attending an all-white junior high, Richardson was harder on himself than anyone, pushing to excel. But that approach wasn't easily translatable at first to Shiprock's teen girls.

"For us, we're Navajos," says Lady Chieftain Vernee Begay. "It was like, all our life we've been put down. So it was just more of a put-down when he'd say that 'You've gotta have this self-motivation' stuff."

Like the best marriages, though, they stuck it out for the best reason: Each changed the other for the better. "Rocks With Wings" has its problems -- it needs a narrator and fewer slightly grainy minutes of basketball. But you're certain to find yourself rooting for the Lady Chieftains to finally end archrival Kirtland Central High School's string of eight straight state championships.

And if the ending doesn't make you simultaneously tear up over Richardson's untimely death in a car accident and smile at how Shiprock's success inspired its players and an entire community to dream bigger, then you're a rock. A rock *without* wings.