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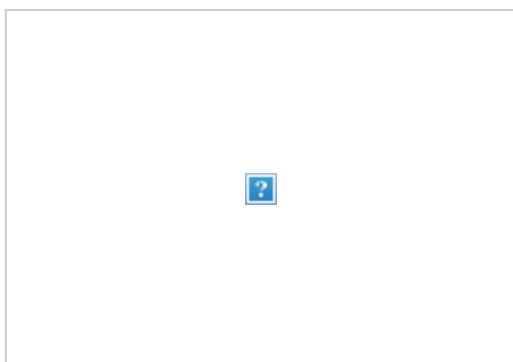
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A coach launches his team to success

By Gregory Moore
Herald Sports Writer



No doubt there are more polished productions being shown this week as part of the Durango Film Festival, but you will be hard-pressed to find anything more powerful than Rick Derby's "Rocks With Wings."

This two-hour, shot-on-film documentary, shown as a regional entry, traces the rise of Shiprock High School's Lady Chieftains basketball team from perennial also-rans to state champions in the late 1980s.

Coach Jerry Richardson and players from Shiprock High School's Lady Chieftains in "Rocks With Wings."

That transformation is sparked by the 1980 arrival of coach Jerry Richardson - a young, African American

basketball standout from Texas with fresh memories of the racist environment in which he grew up in Texarkana. Richardson's effect on a group of shy Navajo girls who find the confidence to play up to the level of their talent grows to include the entire community of Shiprock; it's a town described by one resident early in the film as a place "where people are used to failure."

Derby, who took 13 years to make the film, combines candid interviews with this remarkable group of young women with short segments on Navajo legends, photographs and weavings in a compelling fashion. The team's story becomes clearly linked to the history of the tribe, and the link is emphasized throughout the film by the "spirit line," that imperfection built into every Navajo weaving that links each symbol in the pattern to the outside world.

Local interest in "Rocks with Wings" is heightened by the familiarity of the arid landscape just south of Durango, and focused with the introduction of the Chieftains' main rivals, the Broncos of Kirtland Central High School, just west of Farmington.

Winners of eight straight state championships when the Chieftains become contenders, it's the more affluent, more confident Broncos who must be defeated if the girls from Shiprock are to realize the potential coach Richardson sees in them.

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"These kids were used to losing," Richardson says early in the film. "I had to change their way of thinking, and that's not easy to do."

And more difficult than he ever imagines, it turns out, because the girls are part of a culture that for generations has become used to not achieving its dreams.

The film suffers midpoint by the overdramatization of a coaching conflict that threatens to split the team on the eve of their first championship game, but that lull is quickly forgotten as the teams begin play.

Despite the poorly-lit gymnasiums, some shaky camera work and the often hysterical play-by-play announcing of the radio broadcasts that accompany the game films, the Shiprock-Kirtland contests - close, well-played affairs that aren't settled until overtime - had Wednesday's Durango Arts Center crowd cheering with every 3-point basket made and groaning with every missed free throw.

The cheers continued after the showing as two members of Richardson's teams, center Natasha Johnson and assistant coach Glojean Todacheene, held a question-and-answer sessions with an appreciative audience of nearly 200 people.

"Rocks with Wings" is "Hoosiers" set on the Navajo Reservation, and the documentary does Hollywood's basketball tale one better with its candor and compassion. For the regional audience award, this film received the highest score of five on this reviewer's scorecard.

Reach Gregory Moore [here](#)



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