

TV Best Bets: Dec. 11, 2002

Mike Hughes

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TONIGHT'S MUST-SEE: "Rocks With Wings," 9-11 p.m., PBS.

There is a stark beauty to Shiprock, N.M. The flat, arid land soars with a 7,000-foot volcanic rock then returns to its flat plain. Here, in the Navajo Nation, is a city of 7,000 and an ambitious high school. At home some students lack phones or electricity; at school some are nudged toward computer careers.

Shiprock residents learned the Navajo values of serenity and acceptance. Then came coach Jerry Richardson, telling the girls' basketball team to accept nothing less than the state championship. This documentary uses extensive tapes from the 1987 and '88 seasons, weaving in modern reflections. Shiprock women -- many of them college grads -- recall a time when basketball was everything.

Rick Derby has crafted a slow, honest film. He includes Richardson's flaws and the night the team almost imploded. Throughout it all is deep humanity. Viewers will shout at the screen, rooting passionately for a team that played 14 years ago.