

Metro Santa Cruz – October 6, 2004

Hitting the Highs -

Our picks for don't-miss films in the best Pacific Rim Film Festival yet. Can you believe this is still free to the public?

<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz/09.29.04/pacrim-0440.html>

Rocks with Wings (2002, U.S., 113 min.)

It's fair to wonder why director Rick Derby would begin the best and most inspiring sports documentary since *Hoop Dreams* with the story of a mountain. Even the name of his film comes from the peak that sits next to a small town in New Mexico, and, indeed, it's on this rock that Derby built his 12-years-in-the-making film about the Chieftains, a girls' basketball team at Shiprock High School who changed their own lives and the lives of an entire community with their incredible winning streak in 1989. The Navajos believe their forefathers rode to that spot on a giant bird, which crash-landed into the Earth, leaving only its wing--which is indeed what the mountain looks like--protruding from the ground as evidence. We're told they think of it as a "big bird," which is not so much a metaphor for the film as it is a character the mountain plays in it. In the beginning, as we see it looming over the town of Shiprock in Derby's long landscape shots, it looks like a vulture, threatening to pick at the bones of this run-down community when it finally gives up the ghost. We hear about the 50 percent unemployment there, that half the families don't even have running water. We hear about school kids ashamed to be Indians and of a community divided. The Big Bird is circling. But then we meet the girls on this team, see their passion for the game of basketball and for each other, and witness the tough-love leadership of their incredible coach, who seems to be supporting them through life as much as through their basketball season (what, the Warriors couldn't get this guy?)

"I have never seen the people of Shiprock relate so humanly to one another," one woman attests. "I have never seen smiles, I have never seen handshakes between people. Their winning just did something to this whole community. It has really unified Shiprock." As the girls' season unfolds, the winged mountain begins to seem more like a phoenix, one run-for-the-state-championship's worth of hope rising from the ashes of hopelessness. Good sports films always give us a will-they-win-or-won't-they hook, and that provides the skeleton of the story. But *great* sports films give us something more, and *Rock With Wings* has something more in spades. To hear the girls talk so openly

about their lives, dreams and pain is stunning; to see "teamwork" become a cultural issue is, as far as I know, unique in the canon of American documentary. This is a film everyone can relate to--it's recommended not just if you love sports but *especially* if you never understood how anyone could. *Rocks with Wings* will make you understand. (*Screens Tuesday, Oct. 12 at the Rio Theatre.*) (Steve Palopoli)