

<http://www.sfbg.com/AandE/36/06/film2.html>

## Buffalo Stance

Documentarians who devote years to “small” subjects usually wind up creating complex, “big” stories. Last year, at the San Francisco International Film Festival, Tod Lending’s “*Legacy*” proved the value of an intensive approach; capturing five years of a family’s journey in and out of Chicago project housing, the director wound up making a film about America. The same can be said of “*Rocks with Wings*,” a 10-year labor of love by Rick Derby; on the surface the feature is a look at one high school female basketball team in New Mexico. But, even more than Lending’s doc, “*Rocks with Wings*” – a highlight of the 26<sup>th</sup> Annual American Indian Film Festival – becomes a thought-provoking and emotionally forceful American story; a real-life narrative in which race and class and gender collide to shatter prejudice.

Clocking in at two hours, “*Rocks*” takes time to set socioeconomic scenes and establish the character of its subjects, but this thoroughness results in an increasingly nerve-racking tale that is also deeply informative – the exact opposite of those one-person-against-the-world bite-sized slices of tragedy and triumph that major networks serve up amid Olympic fervor. The plot has more than one heart. “*Rocks*” follows the progress of Navajo-powered Lady Chieftains, who boost the pride of an embattled community with a 50 percent unemployment rate (Shiprock, New Mexico) when they reach the finals of the state championships. The Lady Chieftains are coached by Jerry Richardson, a black man whose experiences of enforced integration thoroughly inform his coaching methods.

The relationship between stern coach and vulnerable but strong team boils over into anger on the eve of the championship, and the game itself – an overtime one-point cliffhanger – is just a prelude to the next season and its lessons; foremost, the compassion that Richardson has to learn as a coach. “*Rocks*”’s bittersweet open ending is true to the Navajo craftsmanship that Derby weaves into a sports-focused narrative. History exists in the present tense as the credits roll. (Johnny Ray Huston)

**'The 26th Annual American Indian Film Festival.' Through Nov. 15.**