

Off the Rez

Jonathan Hock's docu deftly balances the suspenseful sports trajectory of standout athlete Shoni Schimmel with a sociological study of her family and environment.

By RONNIE SCHEIB

Like a femme-focused, Native American "Hoop Dreams," Jonathan Hock's docu "Off the Rez" deftly balances the suspenseful sports trajectory of standout athlete Shoni Schimmel with a sociological study of her family and environment. Other documentaries about Native American basketball players, male ("Chiefs") and female ("Rocks With Wings"), examine difficulties encountered in making it beyond the reservation. What distinguishes Hock's film, beyond its fast-break excellence as a sports tale, is the depiction of the reservation as a viable community whose support is integral to the athlete's identity, instead of merely a reinforcement of historical hopelessness. Docu aired May 14 on TLC.

Hock ("Through the Fire," "Lost Son of Havana") maintains his dual focus on game and family throughout, a task made easier by the fact that Shoni's entire clan involves itself, directly or indirectly, with sports: Shoni's white paternal grandmother and Indian maternal grandmother travel 8,000 miles together each season to catch all her games, while Shoni's younger sister Jude has achieved phenom status in her own right. Dad Rick Schimmel qualified as a star quarterback and baseball prospect before fatherhood curtailed his career. But Shoni's mother's backstory proves even more relevant.

Mom Ceci Moses' dreams of succeeding beyond the reservation were dimmed by racial prejudice even before she became pregnant. Though Shoni's success on the court is at the center of Hock's docu, Ceci provides its fierce will. Determined that her daughter will triumph where she failed, Ceci takes a coaching position at Franklin High School in Portland, Ore., moving 200 miles off the Umatilla Reservation with her seven kids (an eighth is born mid-docu), while Rick struggles to support them through his job on the rez. Hock shows little of the racial abuse suffered by Ceci, though the anger it engenders clearly fuels her drive. In one season, Ceci -- and Shoni -- propel Franklin from rock bottom to a run at the State championship, Shoni's blonde teammates soon psyching themselves up with Umatilla phrases.

Hock expertly builds tension on the court, Shoni's nimble dribbling, impossible three-pointers and aggressive "rez style" play prevailing over more seasoned teams. Sometimes she is fouled by the opposition with impunity, referee prejudice perhaps skewing the calls (with Ceci vociferously asserting that opinion).

But, increasingly, a different type of suspense builds off-court. Thanks to her 40-point scoring

average, Shoni is the eighth-ranked women's basketball prospect in the nation. Though numerous college scouts recruit her, she proves oddly unwilling to commit. By graduation, Shoni has wound up the sole player among the top 100 high school prospects not to have chosen a college, her reluctance to leave home overwhelming her capacity to weigh options until the last minute.

Tech credits are polished, kinetic editing of on-court action topnotch.

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