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TELEVISION REVIEW

Plenty of net gains and personal losses for a budding sports star

Off the Rez. 9-11 p.m. Saturday. TLC.

BY GLENN GARVIN
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A couple of years ago, women's basketball fans all over the country were perplexed by Shoni Schimmel, the fireball guard who was slashing high-school opponents to ribbons all over Oregon. Practically every recruiting service in the country ranked her among the top 10 players, and dozens of colleges were begging her to join their programs. But Shoni ignored them all. She wouldn't even take phone calls from coaches. The first date for signing a scholarship letter of intent passed, then the second, and still there was only mysterious silence from Shoni.

If fans could have seen the hours of footage being shot by director Jonathan Hock for his

documentary *Off the Rez*, they might have understood. It's a soul-searing tale of a teenage girl burdened with the dashed dreams and unfulfilled expectations of an entire people scarred by insults and betrayals committed years, even centuries, before her birth. It's 120 minutes of anguished brilliance, and if you don't watch it you're flat-out nuts.

The "rez" of the title is the northeast Oregon reservation of the Umatilla Indian tribe, of which Shoni is a member. As the documentary opens, she is leaving the reservation with Ceci Moses, her mother and coach. They're headed for a bigger high school across the state in Portland, which they hope will serve as a better platform for Shoni to win a basketball scholarship, which no Umatilla has ever done, and for Ceci to prove she can be more than a volunteer coach at a tiny school off all known sports maps.

But Shoni obviously is playing for far more than a college education. In the collective consciousness of the reservation, purposefully or not, she's become the instrument for everything from validation of her parents' interracial marriage to redemption of the Umatilla tribe's hornswooggling by Washington 155 years earlier.

A lot of frustrated jocks, no doubt, live vicariously through the athletic achievements of their kids. But in Shoni's case, the mélange of old disappointments and thwarted ambitions carries a poisonous streak of race. Her white father Ray was a major-league baseball prospect until he dropped out of Stanford to marry her pregnant mother — a marriage that caused much of his town, including his father, to quit speaking to him. Ceci is convinced that her promising high-school basketball career was blighted by a racist coach. And other members of the tribe chime in with tales of Umatillas whose journey to stardom

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was waylaid by alcohol or racism. For Shoni’s grandmother, what’s at stake is nothing less than compensation for the loss of the tribe’s nomadic life when it was confined to the reservation.

“We’re awfully hurt,” she murmurs. “We’re a hurt people.”

But Shoni’s success on the court in Portland does little to heal the old hurts, especially for her mother. Ceci’s eyes glow with a hellfire rage as she coaches her team to view every game as a war against the rest of the world. Every missed shot, every lost ball, every bad call by a referee is part of a conspiracy against her players.

“Jump on them like they jump on us!” she screams during a timeout in one close game. “[Bleep], you gonna foul, foul good and hard! ...You dig down deep, and you go hard, and you take it away from them. You take it away from all those people who don’t want you to have it!”

But *Off The Rez* is something far more complex than simply a standard text on victimology. Ceci, for all her sensitivity to every real and imagined sleight, acknowledges that not every setback can be chalked up to racism.

“The reservation life is a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing,” she says in a reflective moment. It could hold you down and hold you back. Because there are a ton of Indians that have a lot of talent, and they just don’t do anything with it. ... I was actually one of those.”

Buffeted by such angry torrents (as well as others more temporal; after Ray loses his job in a corporate shuffle, the family faces foreclosure on its new Portland home), it’s hardly a surprise that Shoni grows more taciturn by the day, letting her basketball game do her talking. That part of her story, at least, has a happy ending, as anyone who watched the NCAA women’s basketball tournament this spring knows. What remains to be seen is whether the Schimmel family can answer its own prayer.

“Every night,” Ceci says, “I’m like, ‘God, help me to be a better person. Help me to be better, because I don’t want to be mad. I have a lot to be happy about.’ And I’m trying to get to that point.”

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The documentary may treat the subject of racism with sophistication, but that won’t stop you from seeing it as vindication for your reactionary views.

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