

NEWS

from NATIVE CALIFORNIA

www.newsfromnativecalifornia.com

VOL 38 / ISSUE 2
Winter 2024/25



\$7.95



7 25274 87513 9

REZ BALL

Directed by Sydney Freeland

Netflix, 2024, 113 minutes

Reviewed by Jeanne Ferris

REZ BALL, A UNIQUE STYLE OF BASKETBALL PLAYED ON NATIVE AMERICAN RESERVATIONS, TAKES CENTER STAGE IN THE NEW FILM OF THE SAME NAME. The elements combine to create a high-octane game, with teams constantly competing for points, playing with high physicality, and defending their basket with determination.

“Fans drive thirty, fifty, even eighty miles to see the fast-paced and highly competitive matchups that are much more than games to players and fans [in Chinle],” *New York Times* sports columnist Michael Powell states in his book *Canyon Dreams: A Basketball Season on The Navajo Nation*.

Chinle’s small-town pride is reflected in other Native communities, including in California. At one of the last off-reservation boarding schools in a big city—the Sherman Indian High School in Riverside County—the varsity boys basketball team, the Braves, participates regularly in all of the high school tournaments in the region. The University of California, Los Angeles, has an active roster for the American Indian Youth Conference and Basketball Tournament, which is open to twelve-to-eighteen-year-old students.

Further north, the Hoopa Valley basketball team, the Warriors, has a string of impressive achievements, including multiple regional titles such as the NorCal Elite title. Gerard Marshall, a Hoopa Warrior, was named the 2023 Humboldt Sports Little 4 Boys Athlete of the Year. In addition, a Hoopa Valley girls basketball player, Ivy Lamebear, was selected for Team USA. Their success is a source of pride and inspiration for the entire community.

Many student players aspire to participate in the Native American Basketball Invitational (NABI), a tournament with a rich and enduring history. The prestigious NABI has been a platform for young Indigenous athletes to showcase their skills for over two decades. More than fifteen hundred athletes have competed in the NABI basketball invitational, playing more than four hundred games in five days, an intense immersion in the sport. Needless to say, rez ball is alive and thriving in Indian Country.

With powerhouse Netflix and Los Angeles Laker LeBron James’s sports cache backing *Rez Ball*, this subject seems destined for Hollywood.

Inspired by Michael Powell’s *Canyon Dreams*, the highly lauded Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Muscogee) of *Reservation Dogs* co-wrote the screenplay with Sundance Film Festival

alumna Sydney Freeland (Diné) of the *Echo* series. She grew up playing recreational basketball in middle school and high school in New Mexico. Freeland also directed the film.

Rez Ball is a compelling story about a high school basketball team on the Navajo reservation. While vying for the state championship title, they lose their team captain at a critical juncture. The film deftly handles the societal effects of alcoholism, suicide, poverty, and teen pregnancy with great sensitivity, successfully making it a universal story that resonates with all audiences, not just Indigenous peoples.

An empowered rendition of the US national anthem sung in Navajo stands in contrast to the fact that some contemporary Diné youth do not understand their mother tongue. When they do practice Navajo, it becomes a fine example of team spirit.

Jessica Matten (Red River Métis/Cree) from *Dark Winds* plays Coach Heather Hobbs with a stoic face, sporting electric-blue power suits on the sidelines and hammering the team mantra: “Run fast, shoot fast, we don’t ever stop!”

Amber Midthunder (enrolled member of Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribe) from *Prey* and Julia Jones from *Dexter: New Blood* (her portrayal of a mother challenges one to forgive) round out a powerful matriarchy present in the cast and crew.

The emerging Indigenous teen actors, each with the potential to shine brightly in their own right, added depth and freshness, including a new star on the block, Kauchani Bratt (Quechua/Coahuiltecan Nation) as Jimmy Holiday.

The Chuska Warriors team was chosen from auditions of about five thousand teens (another testament to the Native enthusiasm for rez ball). Ms. Freeland stated, “We wanted ballplayers who could act and actors who could play ball. They had to tape three things before auditioning: shoot a lay-up, a free throw, and a three-pointer.”

Indeed, a big shout-out to the camera operators who followed on roller skates to film the pass and hoop action! No doubles were used in close-ups or long shots, giving the appearance of genuine court-side sports play.

Real-life radio station KTNN FM 101.5, Voice of the Navajo Nation, makes an appearance, with Cody Lightning (Plains Cree) from *Brick* and Dallas Goldtooth (Bdewakantunwan Dakota/Diné) from *Reservation Dogs* as sports commentators channeling Mr. Harjo’s signature sense of humor, which helps us laugh at life’s foibles. Supporting player Tsé Bit’ a’í, better known as Shiprock Peak, needs her own IMDb page—she stands eternal in the background of twelve other films as well.