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Book recounts dream season of Baltimore basketball team

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BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE
FLORIDA COURIER

1981-1982 was a dream season for the basketball team of Baltimore, Maryland's Paul Laurence Dunbar Community High School.

Coached by Bob Wade, the undefeated Dunbar Poets were acclaimed one of the greatest high school hoop squads of all time. Four players – Tyron “Muggsy” Bogues, Reggie “Truck” Lewis, David Wingate, and Reggie Williams – would go on to stellar careers in the National Basketball Association.

In “The Boys of Dunbar,” Alejandro Danois, a freelance sports and entertainment writer, tells the story of Coach Wade, his team of talented Black teenagers from the housing projects, their dazzling steals, fast breaks, assists, jump shots and dunks on the basketball court, and the power of discipline, loyalty and love.

At Dunbar, Bogues (at 5'3", “The Greatest Peanut Since Planters”) declares, he realized that the high school stars he had looked up to had been ruined by drugs and that a life of crime had prevented his dad from being there for his family. That “orange ball” gave Bogues role models, friends, and the will “to overcome all the obstacles, distractions and negative influences.”

Coach, taskmaster

The hero of the book is Bob Wade. A product of Baltimore's deteriorating inner city, Wade was raised by his mom (whose husband abandoned the family when Bob was 4 years old).

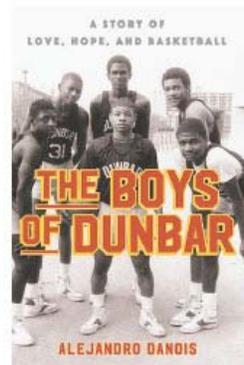
Despite an exhausting 12-hour workday, first as a domestic and later in a textile factory, Mattie Wade went to PTA meetings, insisted that her son attend Bible study, Sunday school and accompany her to church services, and enforced a curfew. An athlete “but not a dumb jock,” with a formidable work ethic, Wade excelled at Dunbar's rigorous college prep program, played football at Morgan State, Baltimore's historically Black college, married Caroline Edwards, his college sweetheart (“She wasn't pregnant and there wasn't any shotgun. We were in love”), and spent several seasons as “a ball-hawking defensive back” in the National Football League.

After suffering a severe hand injury, Wade retired from the NFL, worked as a middle school teacher in Baltimore's public schools, and was hired as Dunbar's basketball coach in 1976.

At Dunbar, Wade was a mentor as well as a fierce taskmaster. His players ran sprints while wearing backpacks filled with sand and bricks. They could not go to the gym to practice until their homework was finished and reviewed by a teacher. Wade kept tabs on his (mostly fatherless) boys outside of school as well.

He found weekends jobs for several players, often driving them to work and letting them spend the night at his home. And he told them, again and again, “The words ‘I can't’ should be taken out of your vocabulary. You can do whatever you set your mind to do.”

Timely story



REVIEW

Review of “The Boys of Dunbar: A Story of Love, Hope, and Basketball” by Alejandro Danois. Simon & Schuster. 260 pages. \$26.

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"The Boys of Dunbar" tells a feel good story that's timely as well as true (since Baltimore is reeling from revelations about the death of Freddie Gray, while in police custody).

The hoopsters did, after all, use that orange ball to dribble and drive themselves out of the ghetto. That said, it's important to remember that Bogues, Lewis, Williams and Wingate had lots of help, from directors of recreation centers, teachers, Coach Wade, and, most crucially, their moms.

And, however laudable banishing "I can't" from your vocabulary might be, it's worth emphasizing as well that since very few teenagers actually do parlay their talent on the basketball court, the football field or the baseball diamond into a college scholarship, let alone a lucrative professional career, the vast majority of them would be far better served if they spent their time developing other interests and skills appropriate for "the real world."

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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