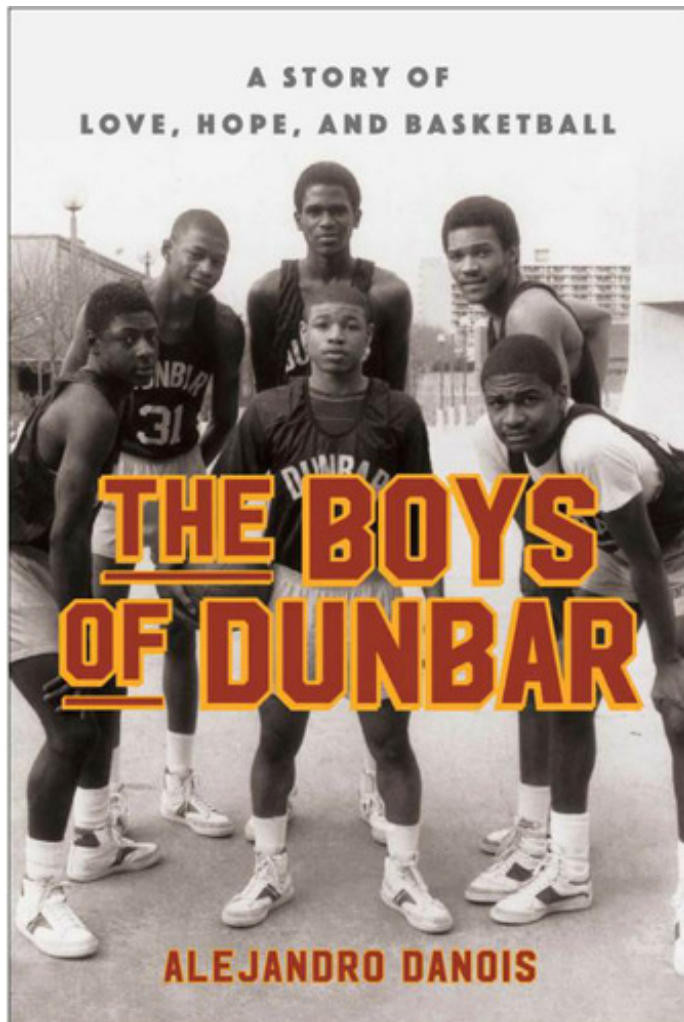


NOT JUST BASKETBALL

'The Boys of Dunbar' looks at complete picture

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"The Boys of Dunbar: A Story of Love, Hope and Basketball" by Alejandro Danois. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 288 pages, \$26.00.



"Bob Wade, after compiling a record of 341 wins and 24 losses over his 10-year period at Dunbar High School, which included four perfect seasons, nine Maryland Scholastic Association "A" Conference titles and two national championships, was offered the head coaching position at the University of Maryland in October 1986 at the age of 41," Alejandro Danois explains near the end of "The Boys of Dunbar: A Story of Love, Hope and Basketball," his new book about one of the greatest high school basketball teams of all time.

"With his background as a tough disciplinarian who stressed academics, along with his accomplished coaching resume, he was tasked with cleaning up the program, despite the fact that he did not have any experience at the college level," Danois continues. "Wade became the first African-American coach of a major sport in the history of the Atlantic Coast Conference."

Even though "The Boys of Dunbar" is ostensibly about the almost superhuman players who comprised one of the greatest high school basketball teams of all time, I really felt it was more of a story about the

extraordinary coach who brought out the best in the outstanding young men he was charged with developing during his tenure at Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School in Baltimore during the 1981-82 season. As many readers will recall, the early 1980s was not the most ideal time to be living in Baltimore. Economic times were hard, crime was rampant and drugs were everywhere. If you were a poor kid from the housing projects, just surviving on a day-to-day basis could be exhausting, and your prospects for the future were even more tenuous.

Wade, due primarily to the constant and unwavering support of his mother and a work ethic that bordered on the supernatural, overcame his own dire circumstances and eventually made it to the NFL. After playing football at Morgan State University, a historically black college in Baltimore, he went on to play professionally for the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Washington Redskins and the Denver Broncos. He learned a lot from his personal experiences in the NFL and returned home determined to help the next generation of inner-city black youths climb out of the bleak surroundings that he

knew only too well. Although his collegiate coaching career was marred by controversy, he spent the last 19 years of his working life as coordinator of athletics for the Baltimore City Public School System, where he continued to help boys and girls find a way to reach their full potential despite constant distractions.

“The Boys of Dunbar” consists of 13 chapters sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue, and it includes an appendix that lists the career statistics (college and professional) of the four players from the 1981-82 Dunbar Poets who played in the NBA: Muggsy Bogues, Reggie Lewis, Reggie Williams and David Wingate. I also appreciated the inclusion of eight pages of vintage photographs that bring the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. A former senior editor of Bounce Magazine, Danois is currently the editor-in-chief of “The Shadow League,” a website featuring sports coverage within a cultural context. His articles have appeared in The New York Times, Bleacher Report, Sporting News, Baltimore Sun, Los Angeles Times and Ebony Magazine. This is his first book.

One aspect of Wade’s approach to his responsibilities as a coach that really impressed me was his complete devotion to developing his players into successful human beings as well as proficient basketball players. In particular, I found his appreciation for the importance of activities that took place off the court to be inspiring. He understood that there is more to life than sports, and he instilled within his players a sense of perspective when it came to the balance that should always be maintained in any educational endeavor.

“Wade’s other obsession was academics,” Danois explains in reference to Wade’s philosophy for success. “From the mandatory study halls that were required for his players year-round, even when their sport was out of season, to the teachers he convinced to give up a slice of their free time to volunteer as tutors. Wade’s commitment to his athletes’ classroom responsibilities was unquestioned. If a star player needed help, Wade had a support infrastructure in place. He’d make sure his kids worked in the classroom because he knew that one day the balls would stop bouncing. If a star player failed, there were no special provisions or demands on teachers to let his boys slide by for the sake of athletic victories. If they couldn’t handle their responsibilities in school, they simply couldn’t play for him.”

As was the case in his own life, most of those Wade coached did not have fathers at home to provide them with emotional support and guidance, so he had to assume that role as well with his players. As Danois makes clear, he often had to walk a fine line between being their leader and being their friend.

“He affected so many of our lives,” Bogues said at Wade’s retirement ceremony in 2015. “It was such a pleasure knowing that he was a guy who had your back, who had your best interests at heart. He taught us so many things beyond basketball. He gave us that focus, that willingness, that attitude, that determination to want to be more than just an athlete. We didn’t just strive to simply be the best basketball player. We wanted to become the best person, the best family man, and that’s what Coach did for us.”

I have never been the strongest advocate for participation in sports – especially when I was younger, I had a hard time figuring out why everyone seemed to take “the game” so seriously. But after reading “The Boys of Dunbar,” I have a heightened admiration and respect for the tremendous benefits the pursuit of athletic excellence can bestow on those who are willing to incorporate into their lives the physical and mental discipline required to be the best. I believe a lot of readers would have a similar reaction to this rousing story of triumph over adversity. I recommend this one highly.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.