

Dave Bing: A life of challenge

Drew Sharp

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As a sports biography, *Dave Bing: A Life of Challenge*, by Detroit sportswriter and columnist Drew Sharp, is well-researched and well-written. As the story of a black family living in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century it is more compelling.

Hasker Bing was a construction worker in Washington, D.C. and the steady head of the household where his son, Dave, grew up and learned how to be a man of integrity. Speaking of his old Detroit Pistons' teammate, Bob Lanier said: "He loved his father ... it shows you the absolute importance of a strong male figure in a young man's life."

Sharp notes the "firsts" in Dave Bing's life. Bing was the first person in his family to attend college. At Syracuse University, Bing was the leader of his team and its top scorer as well as a serious student. Playing professional basketball for the Detroit Pistons, he was the first African-American point guard in the league. Sharp credits Bing with saving the franchise in Detroit after years with more losses than wins and a dwindling fan base. The chapters dealing with Dave Bing's professional basketball career are lively and filled with anecdotes that will interest devoted fans of the game.

Raising the narrative above sports, the author consistently compares how Dave Bing reacted to circumstances he encountered in contrast to other black men. Sharp's account of race relations in the NBA and the country in the late 1960s is deeply instructive. When Bing was refused a mortgage by a Detroit Bank shortly after he arrived in 1966, rather than protest, he got a job at that bank and learned the business from the inside. He gained information and contacts useful to him when he later went into business in Detroit.

Sharp relates how, after he retired from basketball, Bing continued to grow and give back to the community, starting a steel business and insisting it be headquartered within the City of Detroit. In 2009, Bing was enticed into running for mayor in order to fill out the term of Kwame Kilpatrick, who resigned the office after pleading guilty to felony charges.

Sharp is also an astute political reporter. His command of the issues and personalities that dominate Detroit politics is obvious. But, because Bing is still mayor, Sharp occasionally had difficulty getting people to make comments on the record. Nonetheless, his account of the issues that have shaped Bing's term as mayor, and Bing's response to those issues, is thorough and forthright. This is not an encomium to a political hero but a balanced profile of a major political personality still contending in the public forum. In the end, Sharp's focus remains clear and precise: "Make the game-winning shot in a basketball game, and the critical turnover two minutes earlier gets buried from the game story ... But politics is as much about the specific path taken as it is the final destination. It took Bing awhile to figure this out, and by the time he did, time was running preciously low."

There will be more to tell about Dave Bing's life. For now, Drew Sharp has fairly and firmly set the foundation of that story.

JOHN SENGER (Winter 2013)

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