



GOING TO SEE DAVE



By Mel R. Allen

*Some games you never forget.
Because of what happens.
Because of who you're with.*

I know it was in November 1966 when we drove west from Syracuse, straight out Route 90, headed for Detroit, 600 miles distant. But I do not remember whether the sun shone or whether it rained. I do not remember the car we rode in, though in that car I watched morning turn to night. Bernie doesn't remember anything about the car either, except he knows it wasn't his; he had no car. Neither did I. That leaves Paul and Claude, and I can ask neither for both have died. Perhaps, if they had lived, we could have seen each other from time to time, and told this story, told it often enough so there would be neither need nor desire to write it. But

they had not lived. And because I cannot remember about the sky, the car, the landscape we passed, I trust what remains, the memories that have survived more than 27 years.

It was a time when the world beyond Syracuse University seemed ringed with barbed wire, ready to trip us up. That fall I lived in a fraternity house, Sigma Alpha Mu, Sammy. The house faced the dying elms in Thornden Park and was low-slung, modern, institutional, feeling curiously like a motel with two floors of rooms running side-by-side down hallways. Inside that house, anxiety clung to the seniors like mist. The University was sending grades and class rankings to draft boards; behind closed doors, late

into the night, the seniors grinded for A's. A's meant grad school, another year deferred. Maybe the war would end. Meanwhile a new record had been set for American casualties in Vietnam, nearly a thousand dead and wounded in September. In that time, in that place, we drew comfort from sports. These were the days of Floyd Little and Larry Csonka. And though Dave had graduated in June, in that house we continued the days of Dave Bing, our fraternity brother, our friend.

In October Dave played his first regular season basketball game as a Detroit Piston. Inside the house, we could not pick up radio reception of the game against the Cincinnati Royals

SU's 1966 team photo included student manager Bernie Fine (back row, far left) and players Dave Bing (22) and Jim Boeheim (35).



and its great star, Oscar Robertson. So we sat in darkened cars, engines off, radios on, the announcer's voice drifting in and out as if, from time to time, a pillow covered his microphone. When the game ended, car doors opened, their lights flashing quickly, like fireflies, then the doors shut, and we stood unbelieving in the dark. Dave Bing had scored no points.

On winter nights when Dave played for Syracuse we had trudged through the snow and the slush, crowding into Manley Field House, 5,600 of us, squeezing elbow to elbow on bleachers, so close to the players we saw bruises turn purple when an elbow landed. This was long before the Carrier Dome and its 30,000 fans, before the Big East and ESPN and so many years of televised games and so many tournaments the games pile one onto the other, losing their shape and texture, their capacity to stir memory.

But if you saw Dave Bing play, you remember. He stood 6-foot-3. His skin was smooth and brown, and he played at Syracuse for the most part with white players from small cities and small towns. His game, formed on the playgrounds of D.C., forever changed Syracuse basketball. As a collegian, his hair was cropped close, almost shaved; you could see sweat glisten on his scalp beneath the lights. He wore number 22. Later, as a professional, he grew an Afro and mustache and sideburns, but this was the young Dave, his features delicate, almost pretty, with a long, lithe, muscled body. Before we had heard of hang time, Dave showed us, and we could only imagine what that felt like, to be that

strong, that supple, to be so enriched by a talent he could enrich everyone watching. He seemed to float above the rim. And he took us with him.

When he left Syracuse, Dave held the SU records for most points in one season, career points, points in a game, and most assists. In his senior year we had watched him average nearly 30 points a game. Standing in the dark parking lot, our radios clicked off to the Detroit announcer, we asked: How could such a player be so humbled? How could Dave Bing score no points? We thought: If his transition beyond the University could be so painful, what, then, would become of the rest of us?

Claude Young said we would go and see Dave. Claude was a year younger than Dave, but as Dave later said, "This was a time when black students noticed each other." It would have been impossible not to notice Claude. He stood maybe 6 feet and his hair was cut close to the scalp. He was a talker, a teaser, a

laughter whose laughs quickly turned to thigh-slapping giggles. His face was round and his forehead, high and wide, protruded just a bit and he wore his glasses on a strap because he couldn't see without them and he always wanted to be ready to leap into a game.

They met in the early fall of 1963, Claude's freshman year. Though not on scholarship, he had tried out for freshman football, where he suffered a head injury during practice. His playing days, except for touch, had ended. Claude and Dave had roomed together. Claude was the son of Buddy Young, a great and famous football player. Growing up, Claude had known too many famous athletes to be in awe of Dave; he jostled and needled him and they grew close.

Basketball practice had not yet started, so Claude and Dave tossed a football across the grass, Dave the picture of athletic elegance, Claude knowing he was not, his eyesight so poor he'd not pick up the ball's flight until it was nearly upon him, and his hands would fly open, as if snatching at a bird. They shared religion: Both were Methodists who worshiped together on Sundays in Hendricks Chapel. And

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they shared geography: Claude lived in Baltimore, Dave in D.C., and in those cities each left a sweetheart. They sat up nights listening to Motown. And, in a way that is hard to measure, they were destined to be friends by upbringing and temperament. In a racially slippery time when Stokely Carmichael thundered "Black Power" at college rallies, both men possessed the gift of seeing you from the inside out. This was when interracial rooming was rare in colleges, but Dave Bing, who had seldom played with or against whites in D.C., roomed with a lanky white boy from Lyons, New York, named Jim Boehm.

Dave's father, Hasker, worked construction. He told his son to respect everyone; it was people, not race, that mattered. He told him nothing came easy. He told him to earn his way, every day.

Claude's father, though only 5-foot-4, was one of the first famous black athletes in America. He was the first professional black athlete to room with a white man, and when he quit playing, a decade before Claude came to Syracuse, the Baltimore Colts retired a

player's number for the first time: Buddy Young's 22. He said, "All any man deserves in life is the chance to prove himself, nothing more, nothing less."

Dave brought Claude into the fraternity, a house filled mostly with Jewish boys from Long Island, Brooklyn, Manhattan, New Haven, and Rochester. On holidays and when Syracuse played football or basketball

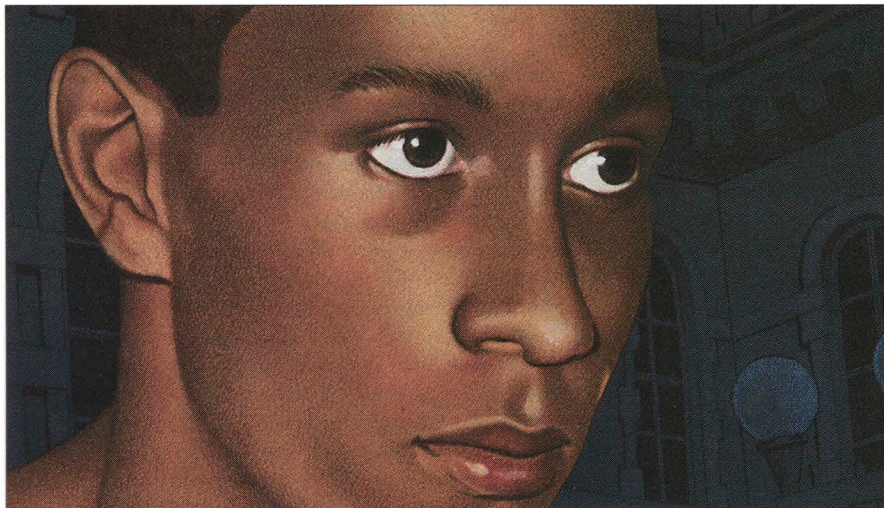
in Maryland or D.C., Claude coaxed three or four of his fraternity brothers into driving south; his mother fed them grits and sausage.

That fall Claude roomed with Paul Wandner, dark-haired, quiet, shy, a thinker, a reader, who, though he lacked the skills, loved sports. Yes, Paul would go to Detroit.

Bernie Fine, my roommate, would go, too. Bernie was president of the fraternity, and he seemed older than the rest of us, a father superior, dishing out fines and reprimands when we spoke out of turn at meetings. He expected the house in order, he wanted to win awards for highest academics, he wanted to win intramurals. He was strong and powerful, toughened in Brooklyn, a prodigious blocker on the house football team, giving the quarterback time to find Dave streaking down the sideline, or Claude, blinking furiously and waving his arms over the middle. He became the manager of the varsity basketball team, sitting on the bench, seeing every game Dave played, brooding over the players' well-being, slinging towels over their shoulders, taking care of them as he did everyone he liked.

Dave was two years ahead of me at Syracuse, nearly three years my elder, and because of this we were not close the way he was with Claude and Bernie. But I was close to Claude and Bernie and their friendship with Dave grafted onto me. If Claude and Bernie were going, then I was too.

We left on a Thursday, November 17. That night the Pistons had an awaygame, and we wanted to be at Dave's house in time to watch it on television. He had yet to start a game. He played for a





All five friends met again in August in Maryland to celebrate Claude and Diane's wedding.

team whose previous season was one of the worst in NBA history. Neither the city nor the team had wanted Dave. Instead, they had coveted a local hero, Cazzie Russell, All-American from the University of Michigan. He was bigger, stronger, and would draw more people into Detroit's Cobo Arena. The New York Knicks and the Pistons had tossed a coin for the right to draft number one. The Knicks won and selected Russell. The Pistons, unhappily, settled for Dave Bing. In the Pistons' team program that season was a picture of "Rookie Star Cazzie Russell." Claude felt many of Dave's early struggles had been because he was trying too hard to make Detroit forget Russell.

We drove up to Dave's house on Prest Street in the dark. At Syracuse, he had lived with his wife and daughters in a tiny apartment in married student housing. Now he had a pretty, three-bedroom house on a quiet suburban street with lots of trees. I marvel, all these years later, at his wife, Aaris, greeting us, four college boys with duffel bags, her with a two-year-old and an infant, making us feel at home, finding the sheets and blankets, as we sprawled in front of the television. Dave scored 20 points that night and the Pistons won. I heard his footsteps at 2 a.m., his door quietly opening as he slipped into his room.

On Friday he showed off the house and yard, the tree-shaded street. He was making \$20,000 that year and said if the Pistons made the playoffs he'd make another thousand. "If I make rookie of the year," he said, "I'm asking for a

\$5,000 raise." We told him we had listened to his first game in dark cars. He said early in that game he had tried for a tip-in and had knocked Oscar Robertson to the floor.

"I was halfway back up the court before I realized what I had done," he said. "I panicked. I wanted to go over and say, 'Please Mr. Robertson, I'm sorry.' He came dribbling up the floor and headed right for me. I knew I was in for it that night. I was right."

He said the awe he had for the Chamberlains and Robertsons was starting to wear off. "I've been too anxious," he said. "I can't get over how these big men can be so quick. I've had to change my style. I've had to shoot harder, and quicker. This is why I haven't played as well as I know I can." He said once he drove to the basket and Wilt Chamberlain smashed the ball back in his face. "He said, 'Don't go and try to embarrass me.'"

It was delicious stuff, and I sensed he had been waiting to talk about these first days, when, for the first time, he had struggled, had been doubted.

The game that night was against the Los Angeles Lakers. Jerry West, Elgin Baylor. Dave DeBusschere, the Pistons' player-coach, had told Dave he would get his first start in front of Detroit fans.

In the late afternoon, Eddie Miles, a Pistons guard and one of their few stars, drove to pick Dave up and take him to the game. Miles told us that Dave had not started because "you have to have two white players on the

court." Tom VanArsdale, the other guard, was white. With Dave starting tonight, it was Miles' turn to sit.

Eddie Miles smiled. "I knew Dave had to start. He's too good to sit on the bench. But I thought Van would be the one to sit, not me."

We stood together, Claude, Paul, Bernie and me, in Cobo Arena. For the first time when they announced the starting team, Dave ran out onto the floor, dressed in royal blue. About 5,000 people were there and before the game the announcer reminded everyone, "On Wednesday Cazzie Russell makes his first appearance at Cobo Arena."

Perfection, or something close to it, came to Dave that night. He played with abandon, as if he were back at Manley Field House in a game against Colgate. His shots poured in, from the corners, from the key, he drove for layups. Eight times he stole rebounds from forwards and centers. Once he leaped over 6-foot-8 Marvin "Bad News" Barnes and Barnes nudged his legs out from under him. Dave cracked to the floor, and lay still. He rolled over and rose slowly, and when he shook his head and stayed in, the crowd rose and cheered and shouted his name. On this night, he had become a Piston. Their Piston. On this night the city stopped fantasizing about Cazzie Russell.

When Dave left the game in the final moments, he had scored 35 points. Again everyone stood. We had never sat down. I doubt we would have said this but I think we felt, I felt, in some mysterious way we had returned the favor of his brilliance, had restored to him his ease, his confidence, his zest; we had carried our memories of that Dave with us from

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Syracuse. For a few hours on a Detroit night we had no future to fret over, only the knowledge that Dave had given us, in return, his greatest game.

Dave's season ended, then Claude, Paul, and Bernie graduated, and in August we all met again, in Maryland, to see Claude marry. I remember Claude hopping from friend to friend, a smiling, happy man. He'd been hired by Paine-Webber to be a stockbroker in training and soon he would take Diane, his bride, to D.C. to live. I see myself at the wedding hanging out with Paul, both of us shy in crowds, shaking hands with Claude, hearing his happiness, his plans, and seeing Dave, now NBA rookie of the year. But I write this knowing what lies ahead.

In the fall Paul went to Washington, too, to law school. But something went wrong, as it did for so many in those days, when the barbed wire drew too close. Drugs took him, he dropped out, and one day, stoned, he burned his leg badly. To save his life the leg was amputated. He entered drug rehab, and, as the months passed, he grew stronger. His life was coming around, he was ready to return to school. In the summer, as a reward, he traveled to Europe. He was in Greece on some isolated island when a pain tore through his side. A doctor told him he could get a helicopter for \$200, or a ferry. Unaware of what was wrong, Paul chose the ferry, and somewhere out at sea on the way to Athens, his appendix burst.

Claude drove from Washington to Long Island for the funeral. The next summer, the summer of 1974, he visited Dave in Detroit. They played ball and tennis and took a sauna, and Dave complimented him on losing weight.

Claude just said he was tired. Later he saw a doctor and the doctor found lymphoma that neither drugs nor prayers could stop. His daughter was 6, his son, 4.

I was living in Maine then, cut off by time and distance from old friends. On New Year's Day, I was watching the Orange Bowl when I heard the announcer say his prayers were with Claude Young, Buddy's son, who was gravely ill.

Dave remembers this: "I was playing a TV game against the Knicks. Diane called me. If I wanted to see Claude alive, I needed to come down. I flew to D.C. that evening. I drove to his home. He couldn't see. He knew I was there. He knew he wasn't going to make it. Just the two of us for half an hour, one on one. I left to go to my mother's house. Before I could get there he had died."

Dave played one more season with the Pistons, then was traded to the Washington Bullets, and playing in his seventh all-star game, in front of his hometown fans, he was named most valuable player. Claude would have loved that.

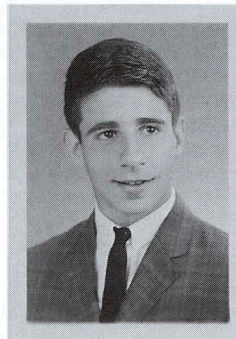
In the fall of 1993 I went back to Syracuse for the first time. I do not know why I had not gone before. It is so easy to lose touch. I came with Danny, my 8-year-old. I was bringing him to the Syracuse vs. Boston College football game. But I had really come to see Bernie, now SU's assistant basketball coach, to ask him if he remembered that night in Detroit, 1966. And I wanted to walk across the Quad with Danny, wanted him to join the surge of people hurrying to the game, but it rained so we parked close and hustled toward the Dome.

We sat behind the end zone. It was a high-scoring game with lots of action in front of us. We ate hot dogs, drank sodas, and when the game ended we descended a stairway and staring at us was a life-sized portrait of Dave Bing.

"Dad," my son asked, "was he as good as Michael Jordan?"

I said to me he was the best because he was a friend.

Then we walked across the campus in the drizzle, found our car and drove to see Bernie, and I tried to tell my son as much as I could remember, as much as he could understand, about four friends who once drove west to see a basketball game. I tried to tell him why some games you never forget. ■



Mel R. Allen is senior editor of Yankee magazine. He earned a dual degree from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Newhouse School in 1968. This is his senior class picture.