

Texas lineman Duncum had special connection to Will Stein



Vaught's Views
Larry Vaught

He was on a recruiting call with Kentucky defensive line coach Anwar Stewart and then later that night found out UK head coach Mark Stoops had been fired. That left Texas high school defensive lineman Ben Duncum in a bit of a quandary considering national signing day was only two days away. "It was definitely crazy," said the 6-foot-5, 255-pound lineman from Lake Travis High School in Austin, Texas.

"I didn't talk to coach Stew for two days and was not sure what was going on. Once I found out coach (Will) Stein was the favorite to be the new coach, I got on a group chat with all the (Kentucky) commits. Finally Coach called one of our guys and said he was going to be the coach."

That was especially good news for Duncum, a four-star prospect and top 300 player nationally by Rivals, because Stein once coached at Lake Travis under Hank Carter, Duncum's high school coach.

"I asked my coach about him (Stein) and coach Carter got hold of him pretty quickly to confirm everything," Duncum said. "I called coach Stew and he told me he was going to stay too, so I was ready to sign. It was very stressful the two days I didn't talk to coach Stew and not knowing what he was going to do. I trusted him and understood it was stressful for him, too."

Duncum picked Kentucky over Auburn, Colorado, Oklahoma State, Kansas State, Wisconsin and Houston. He had over 100 tackles combined his junior and senior seasons.

"Coach Carter having that connection made it a lot easier for me. I loved Kentucky but did not want to go there with no connection. I wanted to have some ties to someone, so coach Carter knowing him (Stein) made a big difference," Duncum said. "My parents probably stressed out more than me. I tried to let them know everything that was happening. I tried to stay calm because I knew how much they cared and worried."

Duncum did not talk to Stein until a day after he was officially hired.

"I was supposed to call him the night before but he went to that basketball thing (UK game). He also had to talk to the donors before me and I knew that was really important," Duncum said. "He called me the next morning at 6 a.m. right before I officially signed. He was excited and talked a lot about coach Carter

Quote of the Week:
"She is the best post in the country. She makes my job easier, especially on defense. On offense, that post fadeaway is magic. She is also another great person," UK point guard Tonie Morgan on junior teammate Clara Strack.

Quote of the Week 2:
"You can spend five minutes with him and know he has the 'it' factor. Even more, he genuinely cares about people and players. He's not just running a football program; he's building a culture rooted in trust, belief and family values," Brandon Roberts, Kentucky's Director of Football Sports Performance, on UK head coach Will Stein.

Quote of the Week 3:
"He is good. We are losing a lot of players and he was at the top of the list of guys I hated to see leave. He was just one of those guys who kept his head down and did his job consistently well. He was one of the mainstays in our offensive line and fit very well here," John Morris, radio play-by-play voice of Baylor football since 1995, on new UK center Coleton Price, a Baylor transfer.

and working for him.

"Coach Carter said he was a really smart guy and very ambitious. He's a nice genuine dude that is really easy to like and respect."

However, Stewart's role is what kept Duncum connected to Kentucky.

"He was the dude who wanted me the most out of any coach and acted like he cared and was so genuine. He's put out a bunch of NFL guys. Every year Kentucky has a good D-line. I wanted to play for him," Duncum said.

Lake Travis went 26-4 in the two years Stein was the offensive coordinator there before going back to the collegiate ranks. Carter is convinced Duncum can have a successful career at Kentucky.

"He played on the edge for us but also played inside when he was younger," Carter said. "For a big guy, he is athletic and can bend. He's explosive and can run a 4.7 or 4.8 (second 40-yard dash). He is still growing into his body and I think eventually he will be a mountain of a man, the kind of player you have to have in the SEC."

"His grandfather played in the NFL, his dad played at Texas and his brother played at SMU. It's just a family of football players."

Carter said not only is Duncum physical but he's also smart.

"Football is very important to him and he cares about it a lot," Carter said. "He grew up knowing that being a good football player was part of his pedigree. He got a flurry of over 30 offers last spring. Only two or three of them fired him up and Kentucky was definitely one of the three and that never really changed."

Junior safety Ty Bryant was one of four Kentucky football players named to the Division I Academic All-District team by the College Sports Communicators. It was his second straight year to make

the team which requires at least a 3.50 grade-point average and significant playing time.

Bryant led UK in tackles (76) and interceptions (4) last season while starting all 12 games. He also led the SEC in interceptions and ranked 24th nationally. He also had two tackles for loss and a pass breakup.

Bryant's father, Cisco, is a former UK receiver who played for coach Jerry Claiborne. He liked what his son did on the field but likes what he's done in the classroom even more.

"That makes me more proud than anything," Cisco Bryant said about the academic honor. "That's the biggest thing. Me, his mom and family have emphasized it is about academics. He takes care of his business in the classroom and that helps him on the field. Defenses are so complicated now. It's not like high school football. If a player goes in motion you have got to change the defense. The offense knows what it is running and the defense is guessing, so you have to know what to do."

Cisco Bryant made it clear early to his son how much he valued academics.

"When he got all A's on his report card in middle school, I still have that hanging on my refrigerator," the former UK player said. "He stayed at about 4.3 (GPA) in high school and at UK it has been around 3.8 or 3.9. So he gets his work done."

Mark Pope played at Kentucky on a national championship team and knew plenty about the spotlight on Kentucky basketball — or at least thought he did. However, his team's struggles this year have created a lot of speculation from Big Blue fans about what has been wrong with the team.

"It's just interesting to watch. Since we've been here — and I'll just use personal things — (my wife) Lee



Ben Duncum made his official visit to Kentucky when Mark Stoops was still the coach but kept his commitment to UK after Will Stein was named the new coach.



Mark Pope understands his team has not performed up to expectations this year but a rival coach says he does not have a roster built to fit his style of play. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Anne got pregnant. She came to a game and everyone was celebrating because it had been reported that she was pregnant," Pope said on his weekly radio show.

During a recent radio show Pope got a call from a concerned friend who heard the UK coach checked into a hospital.

"It's one of the great things. I don't dislike it, but there's just — you know, everybody cares so much that stories get out there, just because we're trying to find something to talk about," Pope said. "We haven't performed up to the standard we want to on the floor, but these are great kids, man. They are pulling for each other, and they're competing with each other."

Pope even acknowledged after the Missouri loss that mental fatigue is an issue for almost everyone.

"I think everybody has mental fatigue everywhere right now if you're putting your whole heart and soul into it, but that's our job to not let that have any impact on today or yesterday or tomorrow," Pope said. "One of the things I love about sports is it teaches you that it doesn't matter how bad things get, you can't go back and re-write what happened."

One college coach has seen Kentucky play enough to know that Pope did not "recruit his type of players" to play the way he likes this season.

"He has talented players that don't fit together for his system and everyone in the program is like a fish out of water. He had a better team last year because he recruited players that fit him and his style a lot better," the coach told me. "It's sad but not all kids just automatically buy-in."

"That's why portal recruiting is a crap shoot. You don't recruit the kids long enough to get to know if they fit your culture or if they have good character."

The coach also understands the pressure on Pope, a player on UK's 1996 national championship team, after he promised Kentucky fans he knew what they wanted at his introductory press conference.

"The problem with saying all the right things at the opening press conference about knowing the assignment (winning a national championship) is BBN is going to hold you to that," the coach said.

Many Kentucky fans have also wondered about the lack of consistent playing time for freshman guard Jasper Johnson, a top 20 recruit who did not even play in the Missouri loss. He did have five points on 2-for-4 shooting in 10 minutes in UK's win over Mississippi State.

"I think Jasper is a victim of the losses. He's struggled defensively at times and it's easy to say a freshman makes too many mistakes," the college said. "He needs to be at a place that will put the ball in his hands and let him play through mistakes and learn to be his best."

"Not sure Pope has the luxury to let him play through mistakes right now but he can probably still score the ball better than most of the guys on their team."

Junior Brooklyn DeLeye had another All-American season for Kentucky volleyball that helped the Wildcats reach the national championship game for only the second time in school history. She had 545 kills — 4.58 per set — along with 279 digs, 42 blocks and 22 service aces.

Not bad considering the 2024 Southeastern Conference Player of the Year tore her meniscus the first week of the season and played the rest of the year with the knee injury before finally having surgery last week.

"She's such a competitor and team player that

it was all in, all the time for us this season," coach Craig Skinner said.

The coach credited athletics trainer Katy Poole and strength coach John Spurlock for a "really good job of managing" DeLeye's injury and status all season. They managed it so well that news of her injury did not get out until just before UK played in the Final Four.

"She was in a good amount of pain in September, then was really feeling good for six or seven weeks and then it started to really bother her again at the end of the season," Skinner said. "You can play through the pain but we had to be cautious and not go 100 miles per hour all the time in practice with her."

Skinner said the first piece to DeLeye being able to play was the "physical piece" of dealing with the pain.

"The second hurdle is the psychological piece to it, but there was absolutely no way that Brooklyn wasn't going to be on the floor for us," the Kentucky coach said. "She was in a lot of pain at times, but the doctors did a really good job of minimizing that and then Katy Poole and John Spurlock did a great job of monitoring everything that she did."

Skinner said DeLeye, a quarterfinalist for national player of the year despite playing with the injury, will "be fine" for the 2026 season.

"She was still right at the top of the league in points per set this year and her defensive play was a big reason we beat Wisconsin (in the Final Four) and she was on her knees a lot during that match," Skinner said. "She'll be practicing with us at some point during the spring and probably will get going hopefully before spring break, but if not, maybe a little bit after. But she will definitely be back for next season and she will definitely be motivated to get back to full strength."



Safety Ty Bryant not only led UK in tackles and interceptions last season but he also earned academic honors for the second straight year. (Vicky Graff Photo)