



TRENT NELSON / The Courier-Journal

"It just meant the world to me, how important Coach makes you feel," Andrew Carr says of new Kentucky coach Mark Pope — pictured while coaching BYU against Central Florida in February — who drove 300 miles to pick up his stranded recruit in the middle of the night. "Not a lot of head coaches would do that. It's pretty special and says a lot about him."

Going the extra mile helped Mark Pope land transfer Andrew Carr at Kentucky

By KYLE TUCKER

Recruiting in the transfer portal has often been compared to speed dating. Connections are formed not over months or even years, as is typically the case in courting high school prospects, but often in just a matter of days.

"You've got only two or three weeks to get to know what type of people you're dealing with," Wake Forest transfer Andrew Carr says.

So how do you make a quick and lasting impression? In the case of new Kentucky coach Mark Pope and his pursuit of Carr, it was by going the extra mile — or 300 miles — to pick up his stranded recruit in the middle of the night.

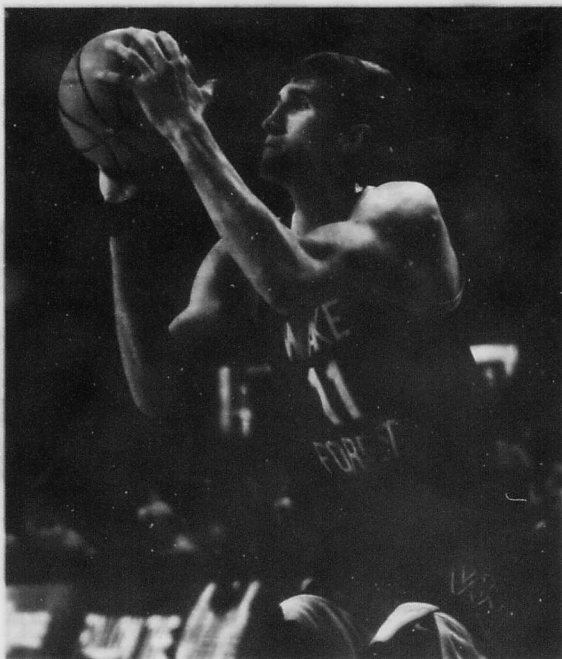
"It just meant the world to me, how important Coach makes you feel," Carr says. "Not a lot of head coaches would do that. It's pretty special and says a lot about him."

Pope was already having quite a day last Friday. He'd taken a last-minute, early-morning flight across the country to Las Vegas to secure the commitment of San Diego State transfer Lamont Butler. He'd flown back across the country to Lexington to welcome Saint Mary's transfer Aidan Mahaney for his official visit and take him out to dinner. And little did Pope know at the time, he was just getting started.

Carr and his parents were also having quite a day. The 6-foot-11 forward had taken an official visit to Texas Tech and was headed to Kentucky — with a Sunday trip to Villanova to follow that the family's flight out of Lubbock, Texas, was delayed. It meant they'd miss their connection in Dallas to Lexington. They let UK's staff know their predicament, and "they were amazing," Carr's mother, Darby, says. There were no more flights getting into Lexington that night, but the staff booked them on multiple options arriving at various airports within reasonable driving distance of campus.

"So when we landed in Dallas, we started running," Darby Carr says. "Got to one gate for a flight to Cincinnati and the doors were closed. Then we ran to the next gate, which was for Nashville, and we were able to persuade the folks at the counter to let us onto that flight as the doors were closing."

And so began Pope's late-night adventure. The Carr family figured they would just rent a car in Nashville and drive the rest of the way to Lexington. Pope would not allow



MICHAEL CATENIA / Associated Press

Wake Forest's Andrew Carr lines up a shot during a game against Notre Dame on Feb. 4, 2023, in South Bend, Ind.

it. First, he tried to hire a car service to drive them, but none would be available when their plane landed around midnight.

"So Coach Pope insisted," Andrew says. "He made sure that he was the one who picked us up."

When the Carrs touched down in Nashville, they had a message from Pope. He was already in his car and well on his way south to retrieve them. Not wanting to just sit around and wait at the airport, they told him they'd get in an Uber and start riding toward him. They met at a Shell gas station off the highway in Bowling Green. Pope had Diet Cokes for Darby — her favorite — and snacks for the family when they climbed into his car after 1 a.m. The Popemobile dropped

the Carrs off at their hotel in Lexington around 4 in the morning and returned to get them for breakfast by 9.

"We had absolutely no idea he'd flown to Vegas and back that morning on top of all this," Darby says. "It makes quite an impression. And I will say: That drive was a treasure. The time that he and Andrew got together in the car, just sitting in the front seats talking, asking each other questions back and forth, just having time to really get to know each other and talk basketball, was so valuable."

Carr's parents sat in the back trying to eavesdrop but not interrupt the instant chemistry.

"To me, it was the energy, the enthusiasm" from Pope, Carr's

father, Phil, says. "It was just, I need you on this team. You're just the right guy for this team. We have to have you on this team." And they're riding and talking, mostly about basketball but also philosophies on all kinds of things, and Pope is telling stories about his time at Kentucky and how special it was. Listening to that was really, really awesome."

Pope and Carr got so lost in their conversation, in fact, that Pope missed a turn and extended the drive by several minutes. Nobody seemed to mind. The next day, on the actual visit, any remaining doubts were put to rest.

In the lobby of the men's basketball office inside the Joe Craft Center, Pope asked Carr to visualize

flipping the number eight in a display about Kentucky's national championships to a number nine. He described — from personal experience as captain of the Wildcats' 1996 title team — what it's like when they raise a new banner at Rupp Arena.

"Being in that moment, it really hits you about what you're able to accomplish there and how special the place is," Carr says. "Coach Pope does a great job of displaying the great tradition of Kentucky and how much it means to the fans and the state, and that we're playing for that ninth banner. You can really tell how much an impact this place and the people around it made on him and how he just wants that for me — I can feel that — and he wants that for everybody who plays there."

What struck Carr's family was how organized and in sync Pope and his hastily assembled staff were less than three weeks after he was hired. Then again, how else could a program go from zero to seven scholarship players so quickly? What the Carrs witnessed was the enthusiastic execution of a clear vision.

"The short amount of time they've had to build this, you would never know it," Darby Carr says. "They are so connected and all working toward the same goal, and it is absolutely amazing to watch."

They still took their scheduled visit to Villanova on Sunday, but their minds were already made up. Carr committed to Kentucky that night. He was joined by Oklahoma State transfer Brandon Garrison, a former McDonald's All-American, on Tuesday. In all, the Wildcats have added five top-100 transfers — and are hoping for a sixth any time now, after a visit from Dayton's Kobay Fira, the best 3-point shooter in the portal. Many of them have been sold on the personal touches by Pope and his staff, the extra miles (literally and figuratively) traveled, and the chance to carve out a special place in Kentucky history.

"What an honor and a privilege it is for Andrew, for us as a family, to be part of Coach Pope's first team," Darby Carr says. "To be able to look back years from now on his legacy, on this group of individuals who've come to Kentucky trying to bring the ninth banner to Rupp Arena, will be just amazing. We've talked about that with Andrew, how treasured that team would be. Pope's first team, if they can put together a nice season. Just think of how meaningful that would be."