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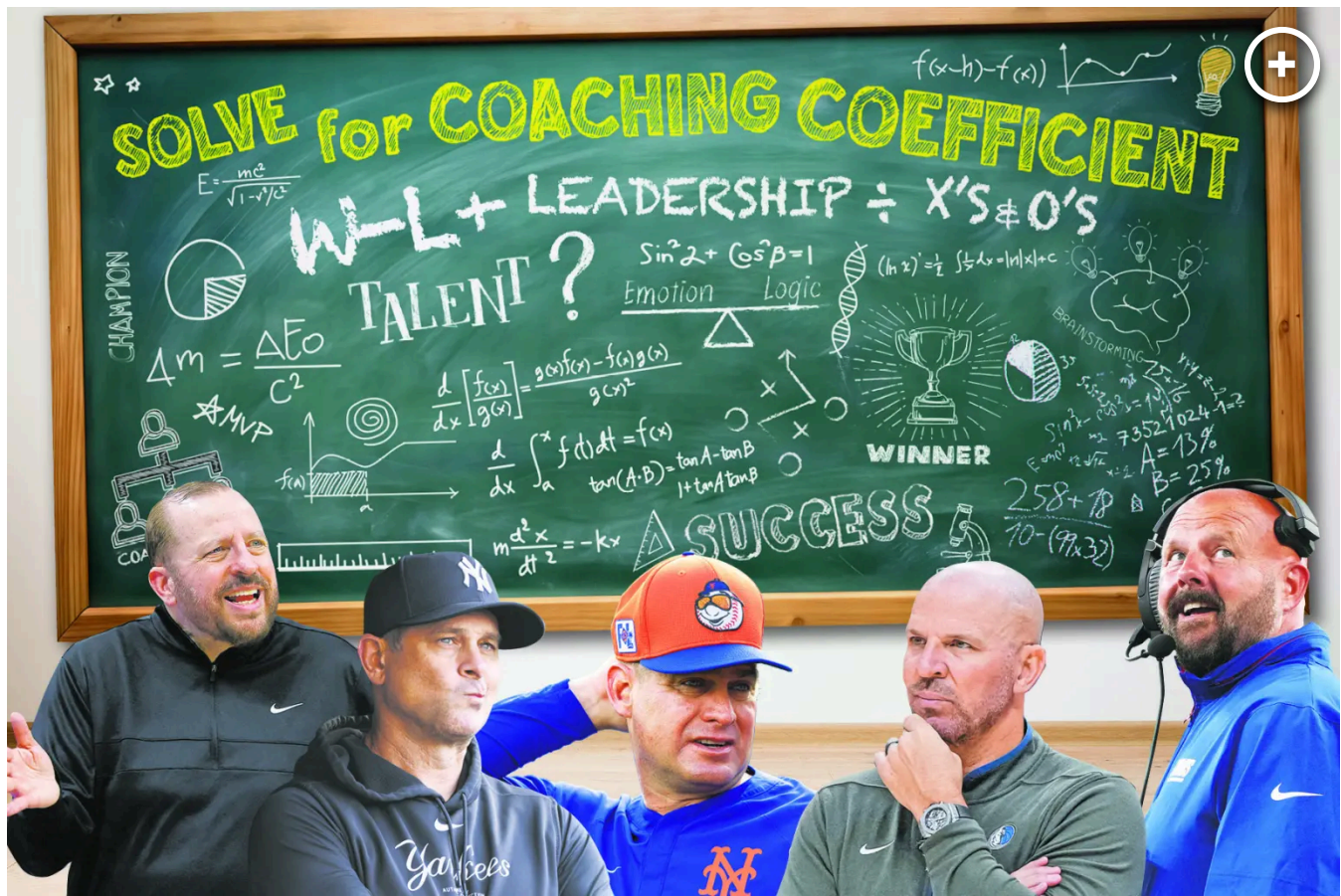
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Why is coaching so hard to quantify?

By Mark Hale

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Three years ago, Brian Daboll became Giants head coach, won a playoff game, captured Coach of the Year honors and had fans ecstatic that the team had finally solved its leadership woes. Two failed seasons later, John Mara had to defend the controversial decision to keep him employed.

In nearly eight seasons with the Yankees, Aaron Boone has taken a team to one World Series, made four ALCS appearances and compiled the fourth-best winning percentage among all managers in the last 75 years. He is perhaps the most loathed figure in New York sports these days.

Five years ago with the Knicks, Tom Thibodeau **won the NBA's Coach of the Year award** for a second time. Last season he took the organization further than it had been in a quarter century. Three days later after losing in the Eastern Conference finals, **he was fired** (for the third time in his career) and replaced by Mike Brown — who has also won Coach of the Year twice, yet has been fired *four* times.

In announcing the decision, the Knicks said their goal was solely to win a championship. Thibodeau has never been a head coach of a championship team. Neither has Brown.

Is Daboll a bad coach who had one great year? A good coach who has lacked the player talent to win more? Somewhere in between?

Is Boone a top manager who **shoulders too much blame** from a demanding fan base? A poor manager who is failing to maximize a talented, big-payroll roster? Somewhere in between?



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Aaron Boone has won 58 percent of the games he's managed for the Yankees.

AP

Is Thibodeau an elite coach who eventually would have broken through to win the coveted championship? A flawed and stubborn leader with a non-championship ceiling? Somewhere in between?

This is the world of coaching and managing — and not just in New York. In an era in which nearly everything can be quantified with metrics and analytics, incredibly the one area that remains shrouded in ambiguity and completely open to interpretation is this:

What makes a good coach or manager? And how do we determine what effect they have on winning and losing?

On NBA.com's stats site, you can determine a player's per-game turnover frequency on spot-up plays. On Cleaning The Glass, you can examine Jalen Brunson's ranking among point guards on long midrange jumpers. On Baseball Savant, you can measure active spin rates on curveballs. On FanGraphs, you can find Max Fried's changeup runs-above-average per 100 pitches.

On none of those sites will you find a basic metric to evaluate a manager or coach.

"We have so many team and player metrics because a lot of what they do to impact winning and losing is at least somewhat measurable. We can observe it, record statistics and analyze them," says Ben Falk, creator of Cleaning The Glass and former analytics executive with the 76ers and Trail Blazers.



Carlos Mendoza (left) guided the Mets to the NLCS in his first season in the dugout, but Mets GM David Stearns (right) says he does not have a quantifiable method to evaluate a manager.

JASON SZENES/NEW YORK POST

“But the vast majority of what a coach does to impact winning and losing is not publicly observed, and so it is very difficult to create any metrics from it. There are ways people can try to tease out some general form of impact, and people have attempted it, but anything like that is at best going to be very rough.”

FanGraphs has no managerial metrics. Baseball Prospectus tracks bullpen management in its Annual but the site doesn’t produce, say, an overall manager version of WAR. And consider that the Mets and Yankees have two of MLB’s deepest data and science groups. Yet when asked if he had any metric to evaluate managers, Brian Cashman said flatly, “No.” Asked the same, David Stearns replied, “We do not have any metric that we use to evaluate a manager.”

Former Nets GM Billy King is now managing director with TurnkeyZRG, an executive and coaching search firm for sports, media and music. He doesn’t think we’ll reach a point where there is an accepted method to evaluate coaches or managers objectively. King says there’s no metric that can predict true coaching success.

“There’s no data that say this guy’s gonna be a Bill Parcells or Coach K,” King says. “I just think that some guys have an innate ability to understand how to communicate and how to motivate at an unbelievable level. And to do it when guys are making millions and they still do it.”

This leads to the natural question — how *do* you, or how *should* you, evaluate a coach or manager?

“You have to be evaluated on your wins and losses, that’s the nature of sports,” Tigers manager AJ Hinch says. “But I also believe there is an additional analysis that needs to occur about processes, relationships, ability to build a staff, the in-game decision-making.”



Tigers manager A.J. Hinch (middle) believes managers should be judged not only on wins and losses but also how well they build relationships.

Getty Images

Adds Celtics President of Basketball Operations Brad Stevens, a former highly successful coach for the Celtics and collegiately at Butler who has hired two top Celtics coaches in Ime Udoka and Joe Mazzulla, “Coaches are often measured publicly by their team’s metrics and the individual player’s growth curves. The easiest thing in the world to do is evaluate someone based on their [wins and losses] or the overall team metrics. I care much less about any of those metrics than what I see in games, on film and on the practice court.”

Both of those sentiments are certainly reasonable — there’s more to a coach than simply the standings or the statistics. But that’s also precisely the point here — and the problem.

The standings we can see. The statistics we can examine. Those are tangible markers. The rest clearly matters — but it’s unquantifiable.

Of course, as Hinch says, wins and losses do — and should — matter. It's just that they should matter in context.

When asked how he evaluates managers, Cashman admits, “Results, first and foremost. I think the foundation of a good manager is consistently being provided good players. If you have good players, therefore good teams, you’re in a position to be a good manager. And if you’re a good manager with a bad team, you’re not gonna have the results.”



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Celtics team president Brad Stevens judges the coaches he’s hired in Boston more on what he observes in practices and games than on any team metrics.

NBAE via Getty Images

Or as Stevens says, “A coach’s goal should be to get the most out of the group — and not every group has the same ceiling.”

There’s the famous line that’s been used to describe both Bear Bryant and Don Shula — that what made them such football coaching marvels was that Bryant or Shula “can take [his] and beat [yours], and then he can turn around and take [yours] and beat [his].”

Maybe those two could do that. Most can’t.

Steve Kerr, a four-time championship coach with the Warriors, played for both Phil Jackson (11 championships with the Bulls and Lakers) and Gregg Popovich (five titles with the Spurs). Jackson famously coached Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant, Scottie Pippen and Pau Gasol. Popovich coached Tim Duncan, David Robinson, Tony Parker, Manu Ginobili and Kawhi Leonard.

That's an incredible collection of star power.

"One of the things I love about Pop is we have dinner, he pours the wine and he holds up his glass and he says, 'Here's to Tim Duncan,'" Kerr says. "It's a message that we're all at the mercy of our talent."

Naturally, the follow-up question to Kerr was whether he also similarly toasts his own legendary player, Stephen Curry. And you can guess the answer.



Steve Kerr credits being able to coach Steph Curry for the four titles he has won with the Warriors.

NBAE via Getty Images

Andy Reid was a highly accomplished longtime coach who failed to win a Super Bowl in his first 20 seasons steering the Eagles and Chiefs and only even reached the big game once in those two decades. He finally broke through in Season 21 — his second with Patrick Mahomes as his starting quarterback.

With Mahomes, Reid has now won three Super Bowls (and gone to two others) in the last six seasons.

Does that mean Reid wasn't elite before Mahomes and is elite now? That seems ludicrous. A good coach is a good coach, and presumably a bad coach is a bad coach.

(Though a coach *can* also improve — as King says, “Jason Kidd in Brooklyn is not the same Jason Kidd that’s in Dallas.”)

But a coach will also need talent to succeed.

Art Howe had a .530 winning percentage across seven years as A's manager, with 100-plus victories in each of his last two seasons in 2001-02, when he deployed a combination of Tim Hudson, Barry Zito, Mark Mulder, Miguel Tejada, Eric Chavez and Jason Giambi. He came to the lowly Mets in 2003, went 66-95 his first year, 71-91 his second year and was fired.

The reverse happened across town. In Joe Torre's first 15 seasons as manager, with three different franchises, he made the playoffs only once, delivered an overall .471 winning percentage and was fired three times. In his first season with the Yankees, he went 92-70 and won the World Series — the first of four that he'd capture in his initial five seasons in The Bronx.



Joe Torre arrived as the Yankees manager in 1995 with a .471 career winning percentage. He left 12 years later with four World Series titles to his credit.

Getty Images

Torre posted a .605 winning percentage across 12 years in pinstripes. If that figure were his lifetime winning percentage, it would rank as the second-best mark since 1950 by anyone who managed at least 25 games.

“You might have the next Phil Jackson on your hands,” Kerr says, “but you have lousy talent and you’re never gonna know if you have the next Phil Jackson on your hands because that guy just didn’t have the opportunity.”

Actually, there is a way that coaches and managers are measured, right? Through awards. There’s Coach of the Year. There’s Manager of the Year. If you win one of those, that should be pretty telling, shouldn’t it?

Well...

Consider that in the NFL, Mike Tomlin (Super Bowl champion and 12th all-time in wins) has never won Coach of the Year. Reid (three-time Super Bowl champion and fourth in wins) won it just once — and hasn't won it in the last 22 years, despite his ridiculous success.

Meanwhile, Matt Nagy, Mike Smith, Lovie Smith, Jim Fassel and Jason Garrett each have won Coach of the Year. Browns coach Kevin Stefanski has now won the award *twice* — yet in his five seasons with the Browns, Cleveland is 40-44, including 3-14 last season.

What do we make of that?



The Steelers' Mike Tomlin has the 12th-most wins in NFL coaching history, yet he has never won an NFL Coach of the Year award.

Getty Images

Do these awards matter? Should they?

Last November, Sterling Shepard was **speaking about his former Giants coach**, Daboll, to The Post's Paul Schwartz and said, "I don't think you go from being the Coach of the Year two years ago to just being a guy that can't get the job done. I don't believe that."

Maybe. But only if we're sure the award is really representative of coaching caliber.

Let's take the NBA. In the league's annual GM survey, the Heat's Erik Spoelstra has been voted the NBA's best coach each of the last five seasons. Yet Spoelstra has never won Coach of the Year.

Jackson, the 11-time champ, was named Coach of the Year a mere once — and he had to coach the Bulls to a then-record 72-10 mark to do so. Kerr, with his four championships, also only won it once — and he had to coach the Warriors to a current-record 73-9 mark.

Meanwhile, Scott Brooks, Byron Scott and Dwane Casey — who own a combined .474 winning percentage — each have Coach of the Year awards.

Also, for such a prestigious honor, winning a Coach or Manager of the Year award seems to be forgotten very quickly. With the Raptors, Casey was voted Coach of the Year for the 2017-18 season — and was fired literally after that season was over.

And how about this narrative circle? With the Suns, Monty Williams won Coach of the Year in 2021-22, then was fired a year later, hired by the Pistons and handed a six-year \$78 million contract, then fired by Detroit one year into *that* contract. The Pistons replaced him last year with JB Bickerstaff — who had been fired by the Cavs the previous season — and Bickerstaff led Detroit to a 30-win improvement. Who replaced Bickerstaff in Cleveland? Kenny Atkinson, whom the Nets had let go in 2020. Atkinson won 64 games with the Cavs — earning *him* Coach of the Year for, essentially, improving on Bickerstaff's work. The runner-up in the voting? Bickerstaff.



Fired by the Cavaliers after 2023-24, J.B. Bickerstaff (with clipboard) was hired by the Pistons months later and led Detroit to a 30-win improvement last season.

NBAE via Getty Images

Was Williams a good coach in Phoenix and a bad one in Detroit? Was Bickerstaff a bad coach in Cleveland and a good one in Detroit? Was Atkinson a bad coach in Brooklyn and a good one in Cleveland? Are they all good and it's just about circumstance? Are they all...basically the same?

Can someone be a bad coach with one team and a good coach with another? What determines that?

"Yeah," King says. "Players."

When hiring a coach or manager, there can be a slew of considerations, even beyond the coach's track record or results.

Do you want someone who can lead people and command a room? Do you want someone who specializes in X's and O's or scheme designs? Does a person's coaching tree matter? Should playing experience factor in? What about the human characteristics — intelligence, creativity, character, emotional IQ, etc.?

Often the hype for a hiring — especially a coordinator or an assistant moving into a head role — stems from a coach's tactical reputation. His ability to devise a sophisticated offensive scheme, for example.

But you might be surprised.

"It's not X's and O's, I know that," Kerr insists. "I think part of hiring a staff is covering your bases on X's and O's. You can do that with a lot of people. It's not an easy thing to get right, but you have options and you can figure that part out after the fact, I think."



Chiefs head coach Andy Reid communicates with quarterback Patrick Mahomes on the practice field.

AP

“To me, there’s just a vibe when you feel a good well-coached team, a good organization. There’s a vibe to it. When a team’s playing hard, the team has an identity, they kind of know who they are, what they are and there’s a healthy spirit. Who can help create that?”

Cashman says, “The most important thing is to connect.”

Indeed, King says when he advises teams, his top priority is “they’ve got to be able to communicate. Because they’ve got to be able to sell their message to the players, to the coaches. And part of that ability to communicate, they’ve got to be able to lead and convince these guys that what they’re selling, they should buy.”

But isn’t in-game strategy and tactical expertise important? What reliever to call on and when? What lineup to use to match up best with another team’s size up front? What play call to summon on 3rd-and-9?

Frank Frigo is an independent consultant in analytics and betting. Previously, he worked for a company called EDJ and explained that he assessed NFL coaches’ in-game decision making with a model constructed by him and an experimental physicist. The model was then licensed to teams.

While Frigo admits that measuring non-X's and O's (essentially, culture) is challenging, he says that "in-game decision-making, and I can speak directly to the NFL, is worth a lot."



Yankees general manager Brian Cashman talks with star slugger Aaron Judge, one way front office executives get a read on how a team's manager is connecting with his team.

Getty Images

According to Frigo, certain coaches' decision-making was poor enough to be worth a game-plus in the loss column. That might not sound like much, but compared to how top *players'* worth is assessed metrically, it would be.

Frigo is skeptical that we'll ever get a true coaching WAR number, though he does allow that perhaps eventually there will be a test of theoretical decision-making that's a baseline for coach evaluation.

"I could see getting to that point where you're making an important decision in selecting a coach," he says, "and you want to get some sense of how they're making decisions under pressure."

Still, the irony is while most of the public outcry surrounding a coach or manager tends to focus on in-game decision making and strategic moves — and clearly that has a real impact — internally that certainly doesn't appear to be organizations' focus.

Stearns says that in-game strategy is only a small part of how he evaluates a manager.

“It’s the conversations that you have in good times and not good times with players. It’s the ability to bring groups of people together in different ways. It’s the ability to interact with different segments of the organization,” he says. “And so when I look at a manager’s relative success or a coach’s relative success, I’m probably mostly focused on most of those things that don’t happen between the lines.”

There are coaches and managers who have previous head coaching or managing experience and get re-hired or recycled for other jobs. How much stock we should put in the success or failure of those previous stints is certainly debatable, as earlier examples illustrate.



As the Giants did in hiring Brian Daboll (right) in 2022, the Jets hired a first-time NFL head coach in Aaron Glenn (left).

Bill Kostroun/New York Post

But what if you’re hiring someone who’s never been a manager or head coach before? What if there’s no experience or track record to even consider?

With no accepted metric for evaluating a manager or coach, is everyone essentially just guessing — for lack of a better way of putting it — when hiring a first-time coach or manager?

What do you think? Post a comment.

There are those such as Kerr, who didn't have any coaching experience but will ultimately rank among NBA history's most successful leaders. There are those such as Derek Fisher, who didn't have any coaching experience and was a complete bust with the Knicks. There are those such as Kidd, who didn't have any coaching experience and as King points out, was a certain level of coach in his first stop (with the Nets) and is a different level of coach now in his third stop (with the Mavericks).

Mets manager Carlos Mendoza had no major league managerial track record, though he was a coach with the Yankees for years and a former minor league manager. Still, Stearns is asked, is it basically you don't know until you know?

"You don't know until you know," he says, repeating the words. "And that is why these positions are very difficult to hire for. It's candidly true for any position you're hiring, even for people who *have* done the job before."



Former Nets GM Billy King (left) hired Jason Kidd to be a first-time NBA head coach in 2013, but says the Hall of Fame point guard has evolved as a coach since.

NBAE via Getty Images


Few jobs in sports are more prominent or more public than coaches and managers. Yet even in 2025, in as advanced a period of objective evaluation as we’ve ever reached, there’s no true, accepted method to determine a leader’s effect on winning and losing. And it seems dubious if we’ll ever reach a point where such a method exists.

“I’m as puzzled as you are,” Hinch says, “as to how to figure it out.”

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