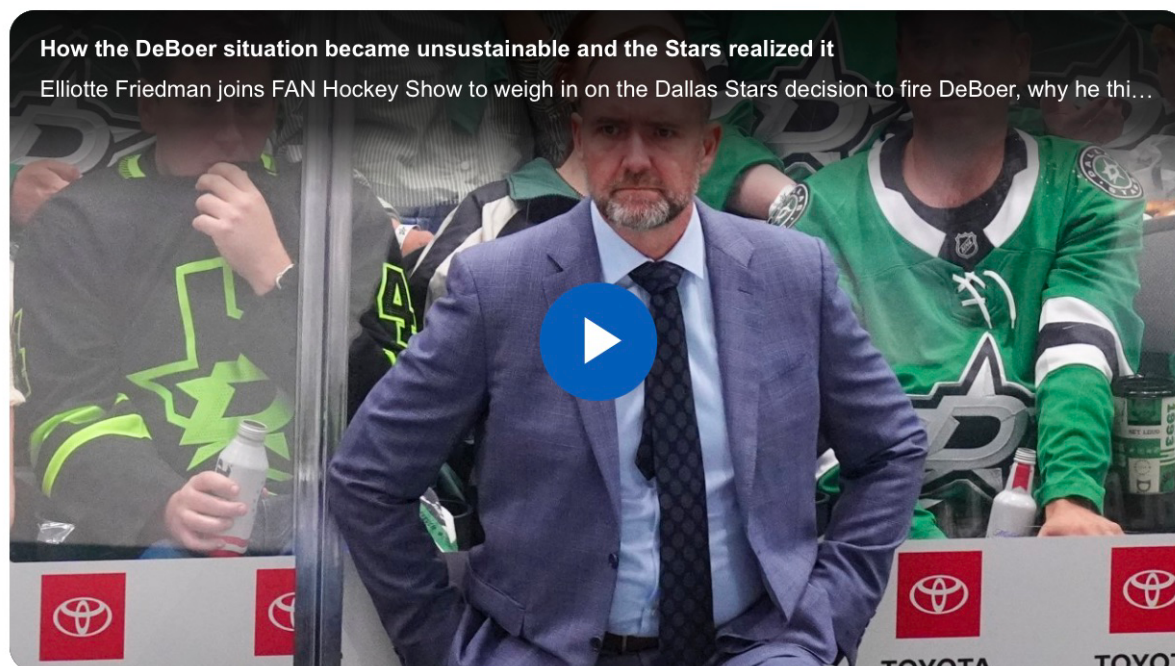


OPINION

# Pete DeBoer, and how NHL coaches have been sapped of all authority

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How the DeBoer situation became unsustainable and the Stars realized it

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Elliott Friedman joins FAN Hockey Show to weigh in on the Dallas Stars decision to fire DeBoer, why he thinks it went from not happening to happening based on the shocking loss to Edmonton, the Jake Oettinger situation and their exit interviews.

There was an era when NHL coaches had all the power. They ran their teams like jockeys atop thoroughbreds, providing vague directional guidance and motivation. No carrots and all sticks. As the one doing the work, if you didn't like a coach, your choices were either learn to like them or fall in line.

Players fell in line.

Coaches dictated ice time and linemates just as they do now, collectively known as "opportunity," and so without their earned approval (and the reciprocal of those good slots), your career could end before it even started. They were in charge, and they treated players accordingly.

As player salaries ticked up, team owners were forced to see those players more as investments — superstars were the blue-chip stocks that could guarantee fans, wins and stable returns. Coaches' salaries didn't rise at a commensurate pace, which led to what seemed to be a collective epiphany from owners that maybe the jockey matters less than the horses. Which, sure, they were right. When those two factions had a dispute, the jockey used to have the final say. But eventually, if the horse was good enough — and contentious enough — we started to see that change.

As the era of player empowerment has gone on, this has been a mostly good thing for teams and a purely good thing for the morale and treatment of the players. It's gotten comfy. A few particularly stick-heavy coaches were forced to temper their behaviours (which is good!), many of that class found it tougher to gain employment, and more than anything, owners and GMs came to view them as disposable.

Years later, with the flat salary cap, the turnover would be comical if it weren't so detrimental to teams. Players make so much money, and the flat cap has meant that moving players has been extremely challenging. And so, firing the coach has been the easiest way to make a change. With 31 teams now not winning the Stanley Cup, a lot of them want change. That's brought us to the point where the average NHL coaching tenure lasts less than three seasons.

This has led to just about every coach being viewed as a lame duck before they pin up a calendar in their new office, regardless of their contract status. The players, not even just the stars anymore, have been able to steel themselves against some short-term punishments, knowing if they just dig in (and don't change) for a half a season or so, that the guy they don't like will likely be gone anyway. All the while, failing teams get to tell their fans "see, we're trying" every time they fire the next coach.

And of course, that lame duck status has been brutal for coaches' ability to get results, particularly combined with the level of ego and entitlement seen from some of today's young stars.

It's been said for years that today's players need far more explaining about *why* a coach is making decisions, as opposed to the days of my co-host on *Real Kypreos and Bourne*, Nick Kypreos, where he explains that you got the *what* and that was the end of that. You just did as you were told if you wanted that coveted opportunity. I saw the shift over my own playing career, which ended in 2009, but I'd argue the need for the *why* — admittedly not entirely a bad thing — has ramped up threefold since then.

Where it is a bad thing is that players don't just want things explained to them so they get the *why*. Many also have to agree on the *why* to buy in, which is crucial in finding

team success. With just about every coach working from lame duck status, if they get players who don't agree, things get challenging.

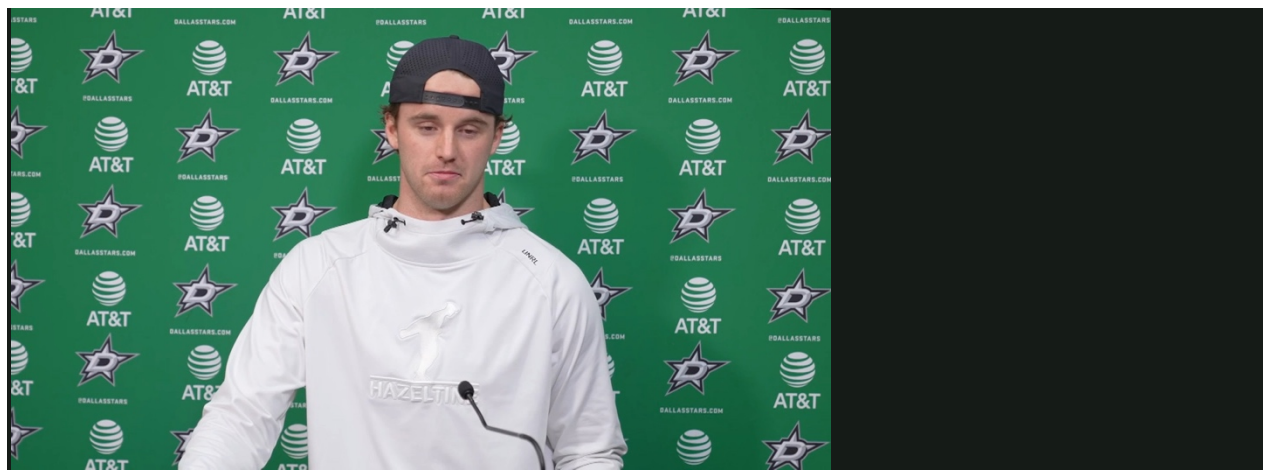
Pete DeBoer was fired by the [Dallas Stars](#) on Friday, and from the outside, it looks like a scapegoating, ego-coddling decision. Now, I specify that's from the outside. Maybe DeBoer's firing had nothing to do with his handling of [Jake Oettinger](#) in Game 5 against the Edmonton Oilers, maybe it had nothing to do with his post-game comments, and maybe there is clear and justifiable behind-the-scenes reasoning for his firing.

Or, maybe it has everything to do with it.

Again, from the outside, it looks like the Stars fell short again, but they've also been one of the NHL's best teams every year that DeBoer has been there. They also lost to an Oilers team that's been crushing everyone, including other well-coached teams.

And so from the outside, it seems like they didn't like how DeBoer handled their star goalie, who's under contract for many years to come. Firing the coach also redirects the blame from the GM, who makes [the statement](#) that the roster isn't the problem. But this Oettinger thing, I'm sorry — a coach seemingly can't pull his goalie who gives up two goals on two shots in an elimination game? Or maybe he can't give an accurate reflection of his (accurate and just) thought process into why he made the move, post-game?

You may not agree with what he said, and maybe Oettinger didn't like it, and maybe he shouldn't have said that part out loud. But when did players get elevated so far beyond criticism from their head coach that they can't work together productively?



### **'I'm going to learn from it': Oettinger on his and DeBoer's relationship**

Dallas Stars goaltender Jake Oettinger says he's going to learn from the situation with Peter DeBoer and thinks he's going to be better next year and that's all he's focused on.

You see it all around the league, including where I am in Toronto, where head coach Craig Berube didn't criticize a star player a single time in the media, because apparently, honesty and criticism are boards from which they eventually build your plank.

All of which makes coaching like playing Jenga. When every attempt to curb behaviours and get players to fall in line is seen as the removal of a piece from the bottom and stacked teetering and tottering on the top, criticism becomes too perilous. To continue mixing metaphors, you've got jockeys trying to control thoroughbreds using Twinkies and Skittles.

This is about DeBoer, sure, but it's about coaching more generally. What do we want that role to be in the NHL? While I recognize DeBoer hasn't won the Cup, he's been awfully successful. Paul Maurice, for instance, was no different than DeBoer if you go back in time just one calendar year. A great coach who hadn't yet won.

I was struck, when going back over the most recent Stanley Cup champions, by the names of the coaches. Let's go back 10 years. We've got:

2015: **Joel Quenneville** (Chicago Blackhawks)  
2016: **Mike Sullivan** (Pittsburgh Penguins)  
2017: **Mike Sullivan** (Pittsburgh Penguins)  
2018: **Barry Trotz** (Washington Capitals)  
2019: **Craig Berube** (St. Louis Blues)  
2020: **Jon Cooper** (Tampa Bay Lightning)  
2021: **Jon Cooper** (Tampa Bay Lightning)  
2022: **Jared Bednar** (Colorado Avalanche)  
2023: **Bruce Cassidy** (Vegas Golden Knights)  
2024: **Paul Maurice** (Florida Panthers)

These are mostly men who are extremely accomplished, authoritative coaches. Their past resumes command respect (to varying degrees), and by and large, they had established themselves and were able to coach free from fear.

Maybe DeBoer is in that class of coach, who knows he'll have another job waiting, which is why he felt comfortable enough to give an honest review of Oettinger's play and why he pulled him. Maybe that comfort and honesty contributed to his demise in Dallas. And maybe this isn't about him, but about how hard coaching is in today's NHL, given the role has been sapped of all authority.

Too much power proved itself a problem, and needed scaling back, of course. But this new thing, where coaches can barely do their jobs with any effectiveness, isn't any



good either. Give the players some credit, I'm sure they can handle some tough love without wilting.

A coach needs to be free to direct criticism and bench players without backlash. Their players need to know the coach is going to be around, whether they like it or not. They need to be able to ask for more. Without that, players will value them less.

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I'm not sure even Craig Berube can get through to these guys.

I still chuckle at the sportswriter who, observing Berube in an after-game press conference, opined "Berube looked happier when as a player he was sitting in the penalty box." Craig spent a lot of private "thinking time" in the "sin bin." Maybe good preparation for becoming a coach?

TJB