

Dr. Sasha Gollish

Season Finale Interview: Connecting the Dots

Episode 6 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

LONG-FORM GUEST EPISODE

In this episode, Dr. Sasha Gollish, athlete, coach, and sport academic extraordinaire and host, Beth Barz, discuss the many of the findings from the first five episodes of the Coaching Research to Results podcast.

This conversation explores how coaching practice is deeply shaped by personal experience, reflection, and intentional learning, with Dr. Sasha Gollish emphasizing a person-centered approach that prioritizes developing humans over just athletes. A key theme is that foundational skills like focus underpin confidence and resilience, and coaches should replace assumptions with curiosity by asking athletes about their internal experiences. The discussion also highlights gaps in research and practice, including the need for internal belonging before team belonging, more nuanced understanding of female athlete development, and greater emphasis on joy, contentment, and emotional awareness. Finally, it underscores the importance of coach self-awareness, through vulnerability, self-compassion, and emotional regulation, as essential to building trust and fostering meaningful coach-athlete relationships.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes
- Subscribe and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your preferred platform

Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

PEOPLE

- Beth Barz
- Dr. Sasha Gollish
- Jonathan Haidt
- Brené Brown author of *Atlas of the Heart*
- Nicole LaVoi research on the Socio-Ecological Model or Ecological Dynamics
- John Green author of *The Fault in Our Stars*
- Lindsey Vonn (née Kildow)
- Jessie Diggins
- Caster Semenya
- Des Linden
- Femke Bol
- Sawyer Nicholson
- Paula Radcliffe
- Maya Shankar author of *The Other Side of Change*

SHOW NOTES

- Heather Wheeler, [Game Plan](#)
- Eliud Kipchoge
- Adam Grant
- Molly Hurford, co-host of [Strong Girl Talk Podcast](#)

RESOURCES

- Coaching Research Results ([Podcast](#))
- [NCCP Advanced Coaching Diploma](#)
- [Tanenbaum Institute for Science and Sport](#)
- [Faculty of Kinesiology at the University of Toronto](#)
- [Empower Her Sports Summit](#)
- How We Feel ([App link](#))
- Future of Sport in Canada Commission ([link to full report](#))

FULL TRANSCRIPT

(edited for clarity and our collective sanity, timestamps are approximate)

Introduction and Background

[00:00] **Beth Barz:** Hey, I'm **Beth Barz**, The Coach Developer. This is the longer form edition of **Coaching Research to Results**, where I bring in a guest to reflect on some of the research topics I've discussed. Today, I'm talking with **Dr. Sasha Gollish**, a longtime friend and coaching colleague and someone I immensely respect in the area of both academics and coaching practice. Her energetic insights are warm and funny and always really make me think. Our conversation is about what connects all of these themes: mental health literacy, emotional regulation, coach emotions, facial expressions, and self-compassion for coaches, and what that looks like in real day-to-day coaching practice. I hope you enjoy this as much as I did.

Hello, I'm **Beth Barz**, The Coach Developer, and I'm here with **Dr. Sasha Gollish** today. I'm super excited for our conversation, and I'm going to let Sasha do a quick introduction of herself.

[01:15] **Sasha Gollish:** Well, here I think this will really frame it for the listeners. I'm Dr. Sasha Gollish and my mother would remind you all that I'm not a real doctor. I did my PhD in the connection of mathematics to engineering which was really talking about how math is a language and one that, in particular, engineers need to speak. Beth and I know each other through the coaching world. I'm an **Advanced Coaching Diploma** graduate as well. I work in youth sport primarily now actually in athletics, but I really miss my alpine skiing roots. If I could be a time traveler and I could do all of the things, I would still alpine ski coach on weekends. I work as a researcher, primarily now in the **Tanenbaum Institute for Science and Sport** in the **Faculty of Kinesiology** at the **University of Toronto**. I think for that let's keep it short. Oh, I'm a runner, I should say.

[02:30] **Beth Barz:** I was going to say maybe you want to mention a bit of running. It's kind of a big deal.

Sasha Gollish: I guess I'm actually still a current Team Canada athlete. I had to do my water training this year which hilariously worked out well for a paper. I've run everything from the

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1500 meters to the marathon at the World Championships level. And I think we met around in 2015 when I won my Pan Am Games bronze medal.

Coaches often reproduce what they experienced as athletes

[03:45] Beth Barz: First thing we can maybe look at is this: Athletes who become coaches often coach the way they were coached or the exact opposite. Which one's true for you? And has the academic side of your work changed that at all?

Sasha Gollish: Oh, what a great question. I feel so privileged with the coaches that I've had, particularly in middle distance and long-distance running. Even in alpine skiing when I was a kid, it was always person-centered first. And I say that as person-centered, not athlete centered. They knew that if they created a great human in me, they'd create a great athlete. There was nothing they could do to make me fall more in love with the sport. As a coach it's really interesting. One of the greatest lessons I learned was when that head coach I was working with was away for a weekend. I was left with the athletes and I started to mimic his behavior. One of the athletes said to me, "Well, why are you coaching like that? Why would you do that? You're not him."

[05:00] Sasha Gollish: They said, "Why do you think that you need to be a dictator and tell us what to do when we have a great relationship?" I said, "But that's what he does," and they're like, "But we don't like him." I asked for a reset and said thank you for the feedback. I had this dictator style coaching style when I was very early in alpine skiing, but had the rapport with athletes, the trust, and the respect for them to call me on it. I then just grew into the coaching style of the coaches that coached me in running; I just wanted to create great humans.

The Role of Focus in Resilience

[06:30] Beth Barz: Was there a piece of academic work that maybe backed that up as you were making that decision?

Sasha Gollish: I wanted to bring coaching principles to the mathematics classroom, specifically confidence, motivation, and engagement. One of the reflections I have now is that we often want athletes to be resilient and we think resilience has to come first, but we don't talk enough about focus. I think you first need to be focused to understand where you have confidence in what you're doing. Mistakes are going to happen. I had a conversation at the **Empower Her Sports Summit** with some volleyball players. They said they make mistakes all the time and have to be resilient and reset.

[08:00] Sasha Gollish: They said they practice that through focus where they gain confidence so that when they make a mistake, they can have the personal reflection of what happened so they can be resilient to focus again. In coaching, I think we've lost our way of talking about focus when it's the most important thing. It's simple and boring and isn't flashy on social media, but it's also a skill that you can apply anywhere. If you can take that skill of being focused in sport where you love something, you can transfer that to a life skill. We demand confidence and resilience, so let's go back and figure out how to teach you how to focus.

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[09:30] **Beth Barz:** Let's tease it out gradually rather than feeling like it has to be a grandiose "you have it or you don't" kind of thing.

Sasha Gollish: Everybody can develop focus. I really don't want coaches to pull the **Jonathan Haidt** research and blame phones and social media. You've got this awesome opportunity when they don't have a phone in their hand to help them work on what focus means. Helping people see what focus is for everybody allows you to find a shared understanding so you can work together as a team.

Applying Research and Finding Internal Belonging

[11:00] **Beth Barz:** You're rare in that you read the primary literature and you're a coach. What's the most significant thing you found in research that most coaches should know about and probably should?

Sasha Gollish: It's really overwhelming if you're not well-versed in academic speak. The biggest question we need to be asking is: what are my strengths and how do I weaponize those? I'm finding it really challenging in academia right now because people say "this is the right way," but it's always situational. One thing I think is missing in the research is that before you can find belonging on a team, you have to find belonging in yourself.

[12:15] **Sasha Gollish:** I am about to go on a deep dive in research about how, as I'm moving through this transition of retiring from being an athlete, I have struggled to find internal belonging. Being a high-performance long-distance runner is where I find my inner sense of belonging. If an athlete is struggling to see themselves as a player, it might be really challenging for them to find a sense of belonging on that team. It's also okay for an athlete to want to leave a sport and do something else.

[13:30] **Beth Barz:** Yes, absolutely. You don't own the athlete.

Sasha Gollish: Right. I am coaching *this* team, I'm not coaching *my* team. That was a great lesson I learned in 2009 from Jason Manning while I was coaching at Alpine Ski Club.

The Limitations of AI in Sport Science

[14:15] **Sasha Gollish:** We would be remiss to not talk about AI here. I think you can use it as a sounding board, but it's going to hallucinate. Please don't ask it for specific research or the biomechanics of a volleyball serve yet. It's also really important to note that sport science historically has excluded women and racial or socioeconomic minorities; you're only going to get a very specific small answer from AI.

[15:30] **Beth Barz:** We need to recognize the stereotypes that the AI has been trained on. Is there a piece of research you've read that described your own experience as a coach so precisely it was almost uncomfortable?

Sasha Gollish: No, but there was a piece of research by **Brené Brown** that described my athlete experience so precisely I had to sit down on the sidewalk and ball my eyes out.

"The Story I'm Telling Myself" and Athlete Check-ins

[16:00] **Sasha Gollish:** This is "the story I'm telling myself." As coaches, it's really important to ask: what's the story I'm telling myself about the team I'm working with? What's a fairy tale and what's the reality? How do you be really vulnerable as a coach to say what you're seeing?

[17:30] **Sasha Gollish:** When I was in alpine ski racing with young kids, I'd ask reflection questions. Instead of just "what did you learn today," you can leave them with: "What was a story that you were telling yourself on the field of play today?" Ask them not to respond immediately—take 24 hours. It starts to weave the thread between player and coach and helps you authentically connect.

[18:45] **Beth Barz:** One coach I used to work with had the idea of "know by asking." Don't just make up stories as a coach; just ask.

Sasha Gollish: Exactly. Think about the assumptions we make when somebody's late for practice. Historically, we often punish kids for being late. What if being late is completely out of their control? Instead of assuming they are lazy and don't care, ask: "I've noticed that you're late, is there anything you want to share with me?"

[20:45] **Beth Barz:** It's also worth asking athletes what video they are replaying in their head when they leave the field.

Sasha Gollish: Great point, because anything you're thinking in your head feels like it's a repetition in your body. Visuals are so strong for athletes and coaches.

The Socio-Ecological Model and Systemic Change

[22:00] **Sasha Gollish:** I'm really wrestling with **Nicole LaVoi's Socio-Ecological Model** right now. It asks you to focus at the interpersonal level: the athlete, the coaching relationship, the organization, and the system. With the proliferation of research, it's really hard to draw that thread through the whole system while centering diversity, equity, access, and inclusion.

[23:45] **Sasha Gollish:** If we take a whole bunch of concentric circles and put the athlete in the smaller center circle, the next layer of the "onion" is the interpersonal relationships—teammates, coaches, and the integrated support team. The third layer is the organization, like the **University of Toronto**. The outer layer is the system, like Athletics Canada or the global sport system.

[25:30] **Beth Barz:** As coaches, we might have an opportunity to help change what that system looks like.

Sasha Gollish: And how intimidating that can feel. Particularly for women where we are the minority, it can feel overwhelming to want to speak up in that system. There's a book—**The Fault in**

Our Stars by **John Green** [Note: Source attributes book to Sparks; it is by John Green]. The message is: you make positive change in the space that you're in. Those micro-changes are the things that change the world.

Training Rigor and Female Athletes

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[26:45] **Beth Barz:** What do you know now that you couldn't have told yourself when you were competing?

Sasha Gollish: I didn't train hard enough. Hear me out—I say this in the most positive way. I've read books by **Lindsey Vonn**, **Jessie Diggins**, **Caster Semanya**, and **Des Linden**. We generally treat female athletes like they're more fragile. I didn't need to run more kilometers, but I could have done more to be a more rigorous, resilient athlete: more plyometrics, a lot more yoga, and more work in the gym.

[29:00] **Sasha Gollish:** There's some really great research looking at how we train females and males in the puberty stage. Girls probably need to be in the gym more than boys do because of the way our bodies develop. I needed to be in the gym every day. Look at **Femke Bol** and seeing what she does in training. I didn't know any better, and I don't think my coaches did either.

[31:00] **Beth Barz:** I wonder what training will look like in 10 or 15 years.

Sasha Gollish: Hopefully more cross-functionality—biking, cross-country skiing, rowing—to build that aerobic capacity without the injury risk of just running.

Fostering Love, Joy, and Contentment

[33:15] **Sasha Gollish:** I watched the World Athletics International Women's Day webinar today where **Paula Radcliffe** spoke. She talked about her love of the sport. What I would say to a coach is: how do you foster that love?

[34:30] **Sasha Gollish:** We need more research in enjoyment and contentment. **Maya Shankar** does great work on this; she wrote a book called **The Other Side of Change**. We need to separate happiness from enjoyment, joy, and contentment. **Heather Wheeler** at **Game Plan** is a leader in this space. There is this idea that you have to be flourishing or thriving at every practice, but that's only normal for about 10 to 15% of the time.

[36:15] **Sasha Gollish:** Between 80 and 90% of the time, you kind of just have to be there—content and committed. We need to normalize bad days. Contentment is where we're going to be normally; flourishing and thriving is really the exception.

[39:00] **Sasha Gollish:** I loved the big hard workouts—the satisfaction of trying to do something really hard. We should shift the conversation away from just the time and focus on how you performed at your best that day. It's an "and both" conversation, not an either-or.

The Science of Smiling and Vulnerability

[40:00] **Sasha Gollish:** I want to talk about smiling. I'm obsessed with **Eliud Kipchoge**. He talked about smiling in the marathon when things get challenging. Research shows the chemical reaction you get when you smile helps your whole body relax. In coaching, giving an athlete a genuine smile makes them feel seen. It says, "I care about you first and foremost as a person."

[41:00] **Beth Barz:** Research suggests athletes are using the coach's face as a performance signal.

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Sasha Gollish: It has also changed how I show up. We have to recognize we're also human beings. 14 years ago, a friend of mine died while I was facilitating a course. I told the group, "I'm not going to be the best version of myself today." We don't show athletes that vulnerability enough. It cues them: "Don't look at my face; my face is about me today."

[42:30] **Sasha Gollish: Adam Grant** asks, "Are you ready to have this feedback?" As coaches, if we aren't in the right headspace, we should say we aren't ready to give meaningful feedback yet.

Self-Compassion and the Coach's "Armour"

[43:00] **Sasha Gollish:** Self-compassion is often misunderstood as pity, but it's actually the entryway into self-reflection. It's about holding yourself to the highest standard. You need it to have the self-awareness to say, "I may have caused this." Self-awareness is not a skill we teach. I've been going to yoga, which is a gateway into a conversation with your body and your breathing. It's about understanding how you're taking up space.

[44:00] **Sasha Gollish:** If you're uncomfortable with "self-compassion talk," start with the books of **Adam Grant** or **Brené Brown**.

Beth Barz: I have a coach right now working through **Atlas of the Heart** by **Brené Brown**.

Sasha Gollish: There's an app called **How We Feel** that helps name emotions. In the movie **Inside Out**, they show five primal emotions, but we need to be able to name more than that.

[46:00] **Sasha Gollish:** Regarding the "armour" coaches wear—the **Future of Sport in Canada Commission** report almost forced coaches to pick their armor back up. There's a large gaping hole in it in the protection of coaches. Coaches are wearing armor because they are legitimately afraid of accusations. Coaches are often underpaid or volunteers with other obligations. We overemphasize technical skills and under-teach the communication, mentoring, and motivation skills.

[57:00] **Sasha Gollish:** For the most part, that coach on the field is there because they care about your kid. If we gift them trust and respect as parents or caregivers, the "bad actors" will be easier to call out.

[48:00] **Beth Barz:** Best advice I ever got was to let other people love my kids and let me love theirs.

My guest today was **Dr. Sasha Gollish**. She has her own podcast called **Strong Girls Talk** with **Molly Hurford**. I'm **Beth Barz**, The Coach Developer. See you later!

This podcast was produced by Anne Reiffenstein at R etcetera Services with music by Sean Patterson at Vinyl Safari Studio.

If you'd like to follow up, Beth can be reached at beth@thecoachdeveloper.com.

Hope you enjoyed it!