

UNWIND

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'NOBODY THOUGHT I'D COME BACK'

Following a horrific crash two years ago, B.C. cyclist Leah Goldstein was told her athletic career was finished. She tells David Spaner what inspired her winning recovery **PAGES B4-5**

The fall and rise of Leah Goldstein

The road to recovery, following a terrible crash, has been the most challenging race of this cyclist's life



WAYNE LEIDENFROST — THE PROVINCE



David Spaner

The bike was flying down steep pavement at 70 kilometres an hour when everything stopped.

"It was scary," says champion cyclist Leah Goldstein. "This girl beside me leaned into me and I landed face-first, and I could feel my lips ripping off. And the skin on my shoulder and my chest — I could feel it ripping off. My arm ended up dislocated behind my head. My bike was in pieces."

After the fall — July 7, 2005, in the Cascade Classic race at Bend, Ore. — Vancouver's Goldstein was airlifted to a hospital trauma unit, with broken hip, ribs, cheek, teeth, ankle, skin ripped and burned head to toe.

"The only thing I remember is I had a piece of skin on my finger that I was trying to save. It was hanging, so I was focusing on my finger, coming in and out of consciousness. The first thing I asked when I opened my eyes was, 'When can I ride again?' They said, 'That's it. You're done. You're finished.'

"Nobody thought I'd come back and be able to repeat the success I was having prior to my accident. Or that I'd even be at the start line of any

race. But nobody can tell me what I can and cannot do."

Nine months after the fall, Leah Goldstein was at the start line for her first race since her recovery, the Race the Ridge in Maple Ridge.

"I broke away from the pack," she recalls. "At that point I knew I was going to come on strong." Strong enough to win the race.

"I was absolutely thrilled," she says, "and shocked, too."

Her comeback is a stunning success story. She's just won cycling's B.C. Cup series — including a recent victory in the Tour de White Rock race — and now her sights are on the 2008 Olympic Games.

As remarkable as Goldstein's return to form has been, it's no surprise to those closest to her.

Goldstein knew early on what she was going to do in life.

"When I was four years old I saw Bruce Lee on television," she says. "I said to my mom, 'I want to do what that guy does.' She said, 'No, you're too young. When you're 10.' I didn't forget. I wait-

ed for five years for my first lesson."

Her mom took her to Choi's, a Tae Kwon Do establishment at Main and Broadway, where she became a most determined student. "Never missed one lesson — I'd be sick, I'd have a sprained ankle. It was natural to me."

From ages 10 to 14, she was undefeated, becoming a B.C., then Canadian, champion.

"When I was 14, a coach from China saw me. He saw what I could do with my legs, came up to me and said, 'In two years I can make you world kickboxing champion.'"

Goldstein went to the address on his card, a storefront at Knight and Kingsway — "little dump in the back, a lot of boxers, not a place for a little girl." That first day she sparred with a guy who gave her a broken nose and black eye. "But I came back the next day. They were all floored to see me there."

In the early 1980s, women's boxing was virtually nonexistent, but women's kickboxing was an established professional sport. Goldstein threw herself into the sport with a passion, six days a week up at 6 a.m. running, hitting a heavy bag, sparring, refining her skills. She was a fast study

and at 15 fought her first professional fight, taking home a couple of thousand dollars.

Goldstein is not one to volunteer information about her achievements, so I have to ask how she did that first fight. "I fought the Canadian champ. I knocked her out in the first round.

"As it got more serious, I needed to train full time, so they allowed me to do correspondence at Eric Hamber [high school]. I was on a mission."

She would have some 30 pro fights, and remain undefeated, leading up to the big day when, at 18, she fought at the PNE Gardens for a world title sanctioned by the World Kickboxing Association.

Fighting for a professional title is no small feat for an 18-year-old. Considering she was fighting the world champion, I suggest she must have had a pretty tough opponent. "She was pretty tough. I knocked her out in the second round."

Having won the title, Goldstein had nothing left to prove. "I figured I did my best. My training was harder than my fights. I got hit in the head, I got a lot of broken bones, black eyes. It's enough. There's a time to quit that sport."

Before turning to kickboxing, Goldstein had starred in soccer and softball. Athleticism is in her family tree. An aunt, Elana Avisar, was a member of Israel's national track team and her father, Sam, had been the country's amateur bantamweight boxing champ.

With joint Canadian-Israeli citizenship, and having just finished high school, after quitting kickboxing Goldstein travelled to Israel, where she would stay the next decade, doing a long stint in the army and studying to become a teacher at the Wingate Institute.

"I was made in Israel," says Goldstein, "but my mom came to Canada when she was seven months pregnant with me."

Her father, in the Israeli navy, fell for Vancouver during a stopover and the family had recently relocated when Leah was born in 1969.

Sam Goldstein had come from Poland to Israel as a young child with others of his family of Holocaust survivors. There he married an Israeli nurse, Ahoova, and they would have another daughter, Iris, three years before Leah was born.

With their life savings of \$100, the family moved to Vancouver, where her mom worked as a nurse and her dad as a machinist.

In Israel, Goldstein discovered her second sport. "I started to cycle a lot and I started to win a lot of races, so I wanted to become a professional cyclist. I started to think I have a talent and passion for a new sport," she says. "I had an itch to come back to Canada and see how I was with real competition."

In 1997, she returned, operating her dad's Richmond deli, Sam's, overseeing matzo ball soup while she trained. "There's a lot of thinking in cycling. It's not just a physical sport. You have to know the wind direction, terrain, the riders, where to attack on the course. I'm a climber. I excel in the mountains. And racing against the clock."

She quickly made the provincial team, then was selected to the national development squad, racing in the Tour de France after only three years of cycling. Goldstein was winning local races and headed toward the 2004 Olympics when she broke her hand after hitting a pothole during a race in Pennsylvania.

By then she was on the Israeli national team, having left Canada's program after being told she wasn't being entered in top races for several reasons, particularly her age.

"Age should have nothing to do with it. Who cares if I'm 60 if I'm winning races? I was winning a lot of races and it was clear I was one of the best racers in Canada, and there was no rea-



Goldstein is first woman to cross finish line at Tour de White Rock in July. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE

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— Leah Goldstein,
on her recovery



Leah Goldstein recovers in hospital shortly after her July 2005 biking accident.

son why I wasn't getting that opportunity. So, I'm going to go elsewhere. I didn't want to. I did everything I was asked to do, but it was a dead end."

Goldstein was in the Bend hospital's trauma ward for 2½ weeks. "My sister drove me back to Vancouver, to St. Joseph's Hospital, \$45,000 later. It was crazy. Down there they charge you there for toilet paper, Q-tips, everything."

Goldstein was in a wheelchair for two months. "I said, 'Mom, I can't just sit here. I've got to exercise.' So every morning at 6 o'clock my mom would drop me off at the track at Eric Hamber. I only had one hand. It would take me half an hour to do one lap. Eventually I got to 17 laps."

Goldstein's recovery was no surprise to her mother, who was in shock when she saw her after the fall. "I couldn't recognize her. She was so in pain, but I knew she will come out from it. They said she would not do any more bike races. I said to myself, 'She will.' Because I know she has a

very strong will. I know my daughter. If she has something to do, she will do it — from the time she started to walk."

She progressed from laps in a wheelchair to laps on crutches. "The doctors said I was healing so fast, that they'd never seen anything like it," Goldstein says. "I know I'm mentally strong and stuff but I would have flashbacks all the time. I'd be descending in my car and I'd be braking. I'd wake up from these nightmares, skidding on my face. It would keep me up nights. I was scared to sleep."

She was back on her bike in January 2006. "It was bad. I was terrified. It took me three weeks before I was comfortable. I have to say my coach Tom Stewart has a way of talking to you, making you feel everything's OK. It took a long time, but eventually I started riding and forgot about the accident."

These days, Goldstein is riding high, winning most everything she enters, including the recent Israeli national championship. She spends long hours training in Vernon, where she has a home ("I just feel at peace there") or Vancouver.

Her teammate on the Vancouver-based Symmetrics cycling squad, Marni Hambleton, says: "She came back with full force. Nothing was going to stop her. And she's had an incredible year." Hambleton says Goldstein's as good as ever.

"The level of local competition has been rising but she's still running away from everyone. Leah gets out there on a road race, she rides by herself. She's an amazing athlete. She's a tough, tough lady — mentally tough. But she has a soft side too, with a good sense of humour."

As for the 2008 Olympics, Goldstein says: "I'm taking it one race at a time. Anything can happen. A crash can happen. If the Olympics happen great, if it doesn't I put in my best effort. Right now, I do this because I enjoy doing this."

"I never want to say, 'I wish I did this, I wish I did that.' I'm going to keep going till I feel that's it, I can't progress any more. I gave it all to the sport and it's time to move on — to another sport."