

Too bad for Leah, cycling's a non-contact sport

As a public service to the women in the elite road race Saturday, I offer the following important piece of advice. Don't jostle Leah Goldstein. Don't trash talk her. Don't cut her off. Don't bump her. Don't knock her off her bike. And don't get her mad.

Because if the Israeli rider wanted to, she could make your day really miserable. It wouldn't be hard. After all, she knows more ways to cause you pain than a team of blind nipple-piercers.

You laugh? None of the women she pummeled on her way to a world kickboxing championship thought she was all that funny. Not when she was building a perfect 54-0 record, with most of her wins coming by knockouts.

None of the drug dealers the 34-year-old busted while working on the no-nonsense narcotics squad of the Tel Aviv police department thought she was particularly hilarious.

And few of the elite Israeli army commandos she trained were giggling by the time she was done with them. Especially when she was leading them through three-hour runs in the desert carrying heavy backpacks. Or any of the other unpleasant drills in her repertoire.

But before you get the wrong idea, you should know something about Goldstein. Finding a friendlier rider here — or one with a quicker laugh — would be a chore.

Just because she *could* tear you limb from limb doesn't mean she *would*.

If you're looking for an underdog to root for in the women's road race, you could do worse. Besides, she's Canadian.

Nearly 40 years ago, while her father was an engineer with the Israeli navy, his ship docked in Vancouver. It was love at first sight. As soon as his military obligation ended, he brought his wife to live with him in Canada. Two months later, Leah was born.

During her childhood in Vancouver, she developed a near obsession with Bruce Lee. Taekwondo became her outlet and her passion. That was until she was 13 when a coach convinced her to switch to kickboxing.

Like everything else she does, she threw herself into it. Three workouts a day. Six hours each day. She even dropped out of school and did courses by correspondence so she could devote herself fully to the game.

It paid off. At 17, she became the world champion by knocking out the Mexican titleist in Vancouver's Pacific Coliseum. It



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was a short reign though, because her own military service in Israel beckoned.

She returned to her ancestral home to put in her time. As she did, she dropped the fighting and moved to running. Then cycling. Then a combination of the two. Even as she was training the commandos and later working as a police officer, she was competing in duathlons.

Shortly after returning to Vancouver five years ago, a Canadian national cycling team coach saw her riding her bike and stopped her. Barb Zimich saw something she liked and brought her on board for intensive training.

"She was mean," Goldstein says with a deep laugh. "She was nasty. I said, 'You would have been a good commando! If I made a mistake, I really heard it from her!'"

But within a year, the aggressive coaching had helped her move up a category. Soon she was riding in the North American road circuit. And — with her dual citizenship — for Canada too.

Then about a year ago, Israel offered her an Olympic scholarship to ride under its flag. It meant a guaranteed spot on the national team, which was just getting established. That immediacy was key for Goldstein because she's older than most riders. Time is not on her side.

"I'm not 20," she says. "In 10 years, I may be in a wheelchair."

So she took it. And she's here. Admittedly nervous, she already posted a 23rd-place finish in the time trial.

Now she's gunning for a top-35 finish in the road race. And vowing vengeance on anyone who gets in her way.

"If anyone passes me this week, they better watch it," she says.

Yes, she's joking.

sradley@thespec.com
905-526-2440



SCOTT GARDNER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Leah Goldstein's athletic repertoire goes far beyond elite cycling.