

Vancouver's blond ambition

Leah Goldstein is putting the pedal to the metal on her way to the top.

ROBERTA STALEY STAFF REPORTER

The overachievers' anthem, "you gotta get obsessed and stay obsessed," could be Leah Goldstein's mantra.

In a relatively few years, the 28-year-old Ms. Goldstein has achieved remarkable success in every endeavor she has tried.

The five-foot-six, 127-pound blond achieved a black belt in karate at age 14. Four years later she was crowned world champion kickboxer, a bloody sport where opponents punch as well as kick each other.

After retiring at 18, she moved to Israel and worked her way into the army elite, training general security force SHABAK, or Sherut Bitachon Klali, recruits at Israel's notoriously tough Base Eight. Two years later, she joined the Israeli police force, becoming an undercover drug cop after only three months of uniformed duty.

Ms. Goldstein has now focused her pedal-to-the-metal drive on Canada's national cycling team and the Olympic games. "I don't think I'm the average woman," Ms. Goldstein said with casual understatement, rubbing her powerfully muscled arms, two-toned from hours spent cycling in short-sleeved shirts on her \$5,000 titanium Litespeed Catalyst bike.

Ms. Goldstein's coach Dr. Roger Somner believes the Olympics, to be held in 2000, is a realistic goal. After only two years of training, Ms. Goldstein did well enough in time trials this

year to make it into the Canadian nationals in July. She placed sixth in the 40-km sprint and 13th in the 105-km road race event. That's a respectable showing for such an inexperienced racer, said Dr. Somner, a dentist who was a member of the Canadian men's cycling team from 1968 to 1974.

"I don't really know what her strengths are yet," said the 59-year-old, who also helps train national cycling team member Jennifer Morwen-Smith, another Vancouverite.

One strength already clearly abundant in his pupil, however, is her courage, Dr. Somner said. And that's what it takes to win. "When you're suffering going through a four-mile mountain pass it's very easy to give in. It's the person with the most courage and ambition who succeeds."

Grit and natural ability have vaulted Ms. Goldstein to the top of whatever she has tried.

It was courage that helped her fight two battles during her boxing career: chauvinism outside the ring as well as matches fought against bigger contenders.

When she started training while still a high school student at the city's sole kickboxing gym on grimy Hastings Street, she was the only woman in a gym that didn't allow females. Talent got her through the door, but it didn't make her welcome. Male boxers tried to force her to her quit. "They tried to beat me up so bad I used to come home with my face blue and my nose broken. I sprained my ankle and broke my wrist but I still went. I wouldn't miss a session," said Ms. Goldstein.

"My sister would put make up on me to cover the bruises and I would wear dark glasses to school. My phys ed teacher thought I was an abused child. She sent the authorities to my house."

Her mother, Ahoova Goldstein, admitted she was mortified by the thumpings her youngest daughter endured at the gym. "Of course I worried," said Mrs. Goldstein. However, "I think a woman can do exactly what a man can do. I'm all behind it."

Ms. Goldstein was so deter-

mined to win a world championship she went on a complete health kick. She became a vegetarian, a lifestyle she still follows today. She never partied and refused alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. "I don't even know what beer or wine taste like," said Ms. Goldstein.

After winning the World Karate Association's kickboxing championship in 1987 as a bantamweight, Ms. Goldstein quit in disgust. "I didn't want anything to do with this kind of sport any more," said Ms. Goldstein, who has also competed in middle and long-distance running.

She moved to Israel and joined the army. However, male chauvinism reared its ugly head again. She qualified for Base Eight, where the country's top soldiers take their training. She wanted to become active in the service as a commando, but was instead permanently relegated to the position of physical trainer. "I felt trapped," said Ms. Goldstein, who quit to go into the police force.

Once again she found herself battling male bigotry. The force had stopped recruiting women because they believed there were too many, said Ms. Goldstein, who wrote letters to top officials lobbying to be allowed into the three-month recruiting program. High-level pressure helped get her in; Ms. Goldstein has high-ranking family members in the armed forces. But she was shunned once inside. "I took a lot of crap," she said. She still graduated in the top three of her class.

Even though Ms. Goldstein worked undercover after a few months and achieved the rank of sergeant, she saw little chance for advancement and returned to Canada. "It's a dead end for women," she said.

Now, she trains up to 23 hours a week, living off sponsorship money and whatever she can make in the off-season as a personal trainer. And she's very happy. "When I start something I do my best and I excel. And that's what I'm going to do with my cycling." □

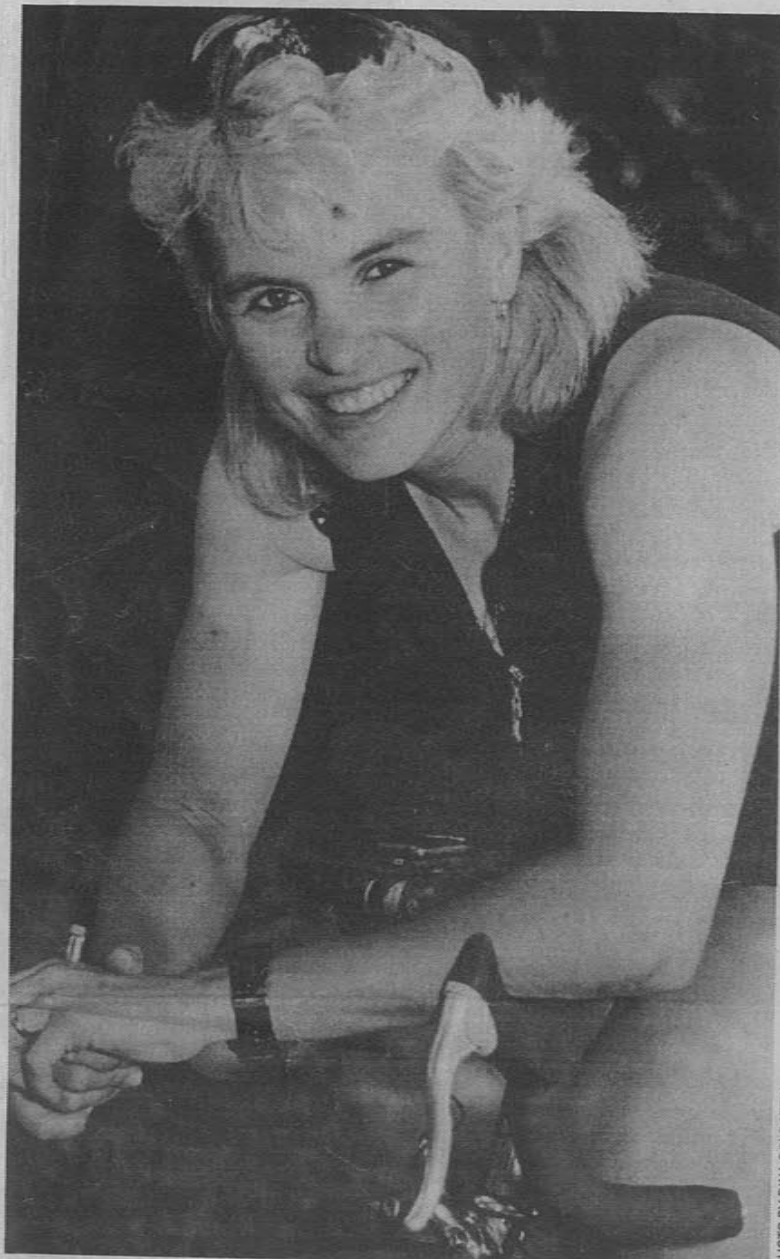


PHOTO BY DINA GOLDSTEIN

ABOVE: Cycling up a storm. Leah Goldstein is determined to make it to the top in the tough world of international cycling.

FAR LEFT: I'm in the army now: Leah Goldstein (right) and a fellow soldier in Israel.

BELOW: Bicycle blur: Leah Goldstein at a time trial in Victoria before the Canadian national cycling championship in July.

