

THE VANCOUVER

courier

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midweek edition



South Van Little League hits 50 page 12

Road warrior

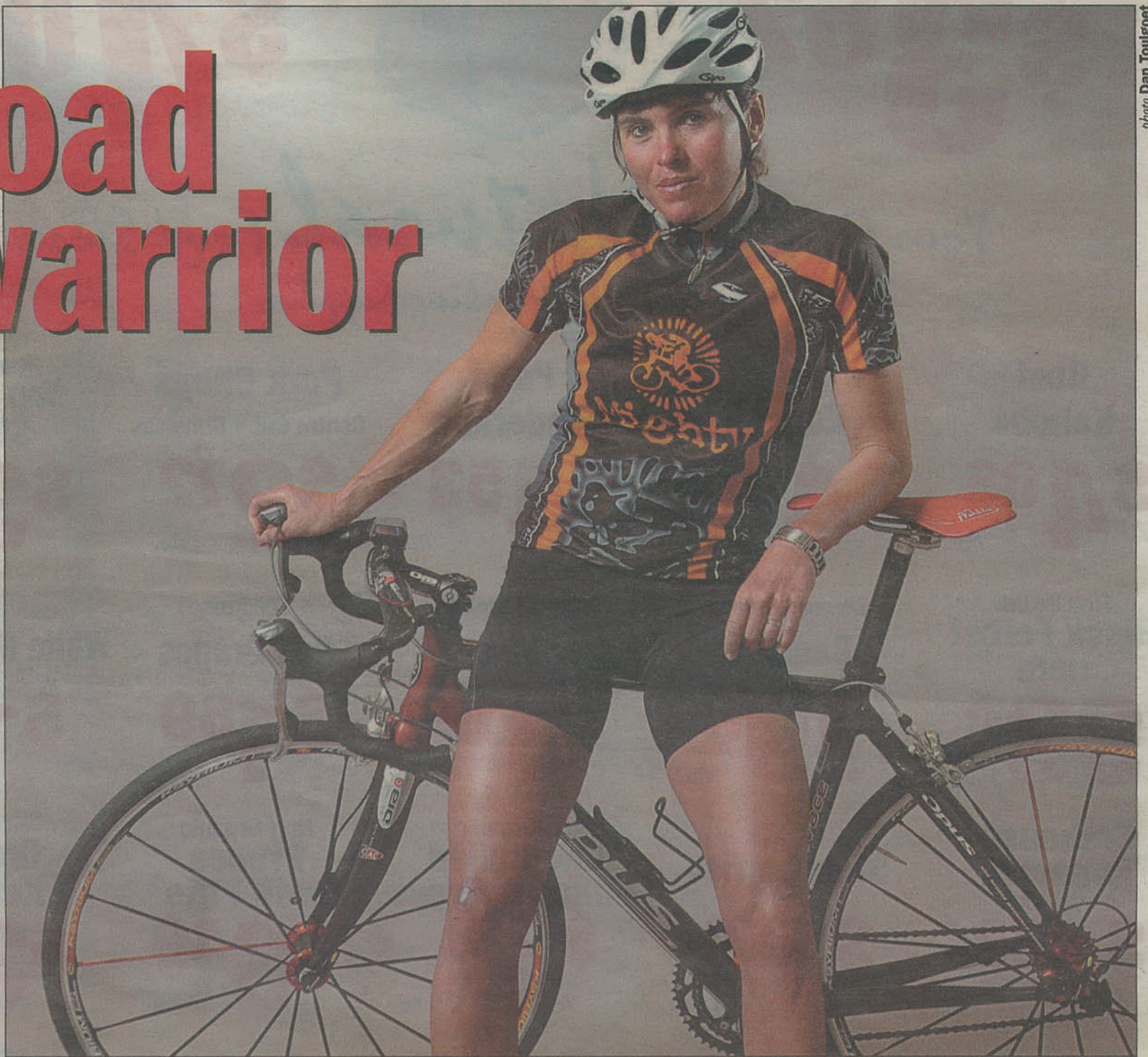


photo Dan Toulgoet

by Mike Howell
staff writer

As pro cyclist Leah Goldstein descends the long, steep road from UBC to Jericho Beach, she is reminded of that horrible day last July 7 when she almost lost her life.

It was on a descent in the hills of Bend, Oregon at the Cascade Cycling Classic where the 37-year-old reached speeds of 70 kilometres per hour before she fell face first into the asphalt.

A nudge from a cyclist on Goldstein's left was all it took.

"I was like a cushion for people," she recalls on a recent Friday morning training ride. "I remember people falling on top of me and I was sliding down the road saying, 'Oh God, when is this going to stop?' I could feel the burning and my skin getting peeled off."

She broke her pelvis, her ribs, her cheek, both sides of her ischium, her humerus in her right arm, lost five teeth and ripped open her top lip.

Her injuries were so severe that she couldn't be moved.

A tangled scraped-up mess, Goldstein lay in the road on a blistering hot day for more than an hour before an air ambulance arrived to fly her to St. Charles Medical Center in Bend.

"I remember lying there, holding the tip of my finger because I didn't want to lose it. And I was using my tongue to feel what I lost in my mouth. That freaked me out. I kept trying to move my legs to make sure I wasn't paralyzed, but I was going in and out of consciousness."

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Leah Goldstein's racing career nearly came to an end when she was severely injured in a crash last year. Now she's back winning races and aiming for the 2008 Olympics—but not for Canada.

REGIONAL COPS? • MAKE KIDS WALK • ESCAPE TO CANADA

cover

Former kickboxing champ, Israeli soldier has eyes set on Beijing Olympics

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The move to the helicopter was necessary, but excruciating.

"I was just screaming in pain when they did that. I can take a lot, but not that much. That was over the top."

Almost a year later, the only noticeable evidence of Goldstein's injuries are a nasty scar above her lip and one on each knee. Behind her are the three months in a wheelchair, the crutches and the idleness.

As she spins along Northwest Marine Drive at Jericho Beach, the five-foot-six, 123-pound athlete looks confident and fit in the saddle. She's surprised her family, coach and doctors at the speed of her recovery.

In Goldstein's first race back last month in Willamette, Ore., she won the mountain stage. Then she won a time trial and road race in Maple Ridge. That was followed by a convincing victory May 7 in Hatzic Valley, where she beat her closest competitor by six minutes.

Next Wednesday, she returns to Oregon for the hilly Mount Hood stage race, where she will again be reminded of the crash that left her father calling for her retirement.

But, as Goldstein points out, she's not ready to pack it in. It's not in her nature. As for concerns about her mental toughness, consider her previous careers.

Before she became an elite cyclist, Goldstein—at 18—won the world female bantamweight kickboxing championship at the PNE Garden.

A year later, the Vancouver-born daughter of Jewish immigrants moved to Israel to serve two years in the military. Her parents lived in Israel before they immigrated to Vancouver in the late 1960s.

Goldstein always wanted to return to Israel and serve the country where many of her relatives still live. Her military duties included leading fitness training for commandos, which occurred after a special invitation from then-prime minister Yitzhak Shamir.

Her military service led Goldstein to remain in Israel for six more years to work as a police officer, which included undercover drug and detective work.

"I saw a sports psychologist about my



After her crash, Leah Goldstein spent 13 days at the St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Ore. and three months in a wheelchair.

photo Sam Goldstein

crash, but I don't know if that's for me," she says, climbing back up the hill to UBC. "I was in the police force and the army in Israel, so I kind of know how to handle things like that. I just know it takes time."

BUT AT 37, GOLDSTEIN knows she only has so much time to get where she ultimately wants to go.

She doesn't talk much about it, knowing she is still trying to regain her old form, but Goldstein wants to race at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

If she does qualify, it won't be for Canada.

Goldstein, who lives near 18th and Main, has a strong allegiance to Canada and Israel. But, as a dual citizen, she chose to compete for Israel, a country that has never had a female cycling team compete at the Games.

She says her decision was essentially made for her by the Canadian Cycling Association. According to Goldstein, a senior official at the association told her about three years ago she lacked sprinting skills and was too old to compete at a high level for Canada.

"That to me was the most ludicrous thing I ever heard in my life. The association basically said I didn't have a hope in hell of doing any big projects. So that was kind of a dead end road for me."

It's still a sore point for Goldstein, who is now funded by the Israeli government as part of that country's Olympic fund. She also receives money from private sponsors.

"When people say I can't do something, it pisses me off—it makes me even more mad. Don't tell me what I can and can't do. I don't kiss anyone's butt. If I'm not good enough,

then don't send me [to major races]. I'll even give up my spot. But if I'm good enough, then I deserve to go."

In 2004, she and Israeli teammates Shani Bloch and Nicole Friedman were preparing for the Olympics in Athens when Goldstein broke her right hand in a crash.

Racing in Pennsylvania's Tour of Altuna on a rainy day, Goldstein hit a water-filled pothole and went down hard. She now has titanium pins in her right hand.

"Right now, I have to take it one year at a time," she says. "I have to get back to where I was last year. It's good to be back on the bike, it's exciting but it's scary too because I'm still dealing with the injuries and they remind me of the crash. When I stand up and climb and pull on the handlebars, I can feel the shoulder pain. Part of my face is still numb, too."

Prior to the crash in Oregon, Goldstein won nine of 11 races, including a five-minute victory over local cycling icon Alison Sydor at the Westside Cycling Classic in Vancouver.

In 1999, Goldstein was a teammate of Sydor's and Sandy Espeseth in the women's equivalent of the Tour de France. Goldstein was what they call in cycling parlance a domestique—the cyclist who, if need be, gives up her bike to Sydor or Espeseth, drafts for them and passes them water in order for one of them to win.

Goldstein owes much of her progress to former Canadian Olympian Sara Neil, a former teammate and competitor to Goldstein. Neil, who retired from cycling two years ago, is Goldstein's coach.

Most Tuesday mornings, the pair can be found racing around UBC, with Neil setting out a rigorous program for Goldstein to follow. Sprints, time trials, 300-metre accelerations and hill climbs up Cypress Mountain keep Goldstein on the bike four days during the week, with races on the weekend.

Neil is amazed at Goldstein's recovery, noting she counselled her after the crash to take a hard look at continuing with the sport. The crashes in Pennsylvania and Oregon

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Mental aspect of recovering from serious bicycle crash often tougher than rebuilding body

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would have forced other cyclists to retire, she says.

"I said to her, 'OK, this is your second bad crash.' To me, that's a bit of an omen. I would have said, 'OK, I need to listen to that, somebody's telling me something, it's time to pack it in.' But for Leah, she said, 'I haven't finished what I wanted to start.'"

Adds Neil: "She's still got the fire, she's still got the desire and she's obviously not done with the sport."

A good example of Goldstein's competitiveness, Neil says, is when Goldstein got her mother Ahoova and sister Iris to take her to a local track while she was in a wheelchair.

"If you can believe it, she was doing laps and timing herself around the track. She's got incredible perseverance. That's Leah."

Neil has crashed her bicycle and knows the mental part of a comeback is often tougher than rebuilding the body. She constantly reminds Goldstein to focus, relax and not to tense up in the corners.

The crash has curbed Goldstein's enthusiasm for criterium races—the tight wheel-to-wheel races on a course such as the upcoming Gastown Grand Prix—because of the possibility of another accident.

"It's not worth it to her," Neil says. "Most of the time it's who's in good position, who has the best line to the finish. It's usually a mad dash to the finish and it's not always the fittest rider who wins the race."

Although Goldstein says she will race a criterium if it's part of a stage race, she prefers time trials and road races, even though it was that type of race that sent her to hospital.

Because of her strength as a hill climber, Goldstein now works harder to be first up an incline, says Neil, noting the fewer cyclists that chase her, the better.

When she finds herself in a pack of riders on a descent, Goldstein admits it still makes her nervous. On her own, she's fine, she says, noting she's about 85 per cent mentally fit in her comeback.

"It's just when I have people around me at that speed. So I notice I'm giving myself more room, maybe be out in the wind more. But I'd rather chase back on [to the pack] than have that fear of crashing again."

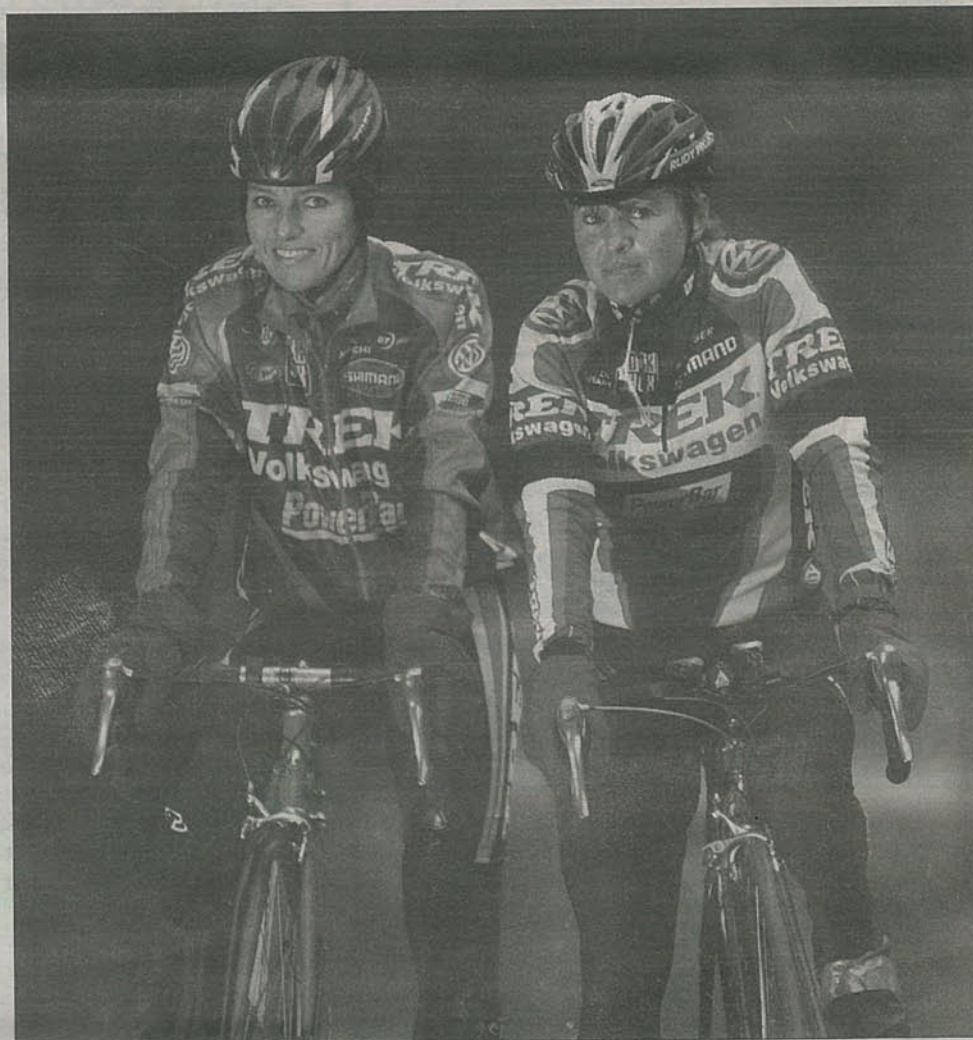
DR. CARLA SMITH of St. Charles Medical Center in Bend was the first doctor to see Goldstein when the air ambulance paramedics rushed her into the hospital.

Smith recalls that Goldstein's right arm was "pretty dramatically" dislocated and wrapped around the back of her head. She performed surgery to put her arm back in place.

As she did this, a surgeon sewed up Goldstein's face that was ripped open from hitting the asphalt. Goldstein had severe road rash with gravel and dirt embedded in the cuts on her arms, legs and face.

"I have to say that seeing as many patients as I do in the emergency room that few, if any, have ever maintained their composure and their sense of humour in as much pain as she must have been in," Smith says. "I tried to be encouraging, and it became clear at the very outset she was exceedingly tough and if there were someone who could come back,

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Coach Sara Neil (left) pictured in 2004 prior to Leah Goldstein's crash. The pair are former teammates and raced for Trek-Volkswagen.

photo Dan Toulgoet

Israeli Olympic team will likely travel with armed guards

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it would be her. Certainly, they could be career ending injuries, they were very significant."

After 13 days in hospital, Goldstein left Bend for Vancouver.

Her older sister Iris drove. They travelled in Goldstein's pick-up truck, taking three days to reach the border because of Goldstein's need to rest from pain.

She was then admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital. The seriousness of her injuries caused doctors to monitor her condition for almost three weeks.

Once she was discharged, Goldstein's mother and sister took over, preparing her food, changing her bandages and bathing her. In a wheelchair for three months, crutches for two months, the woman with the on-the-go lifestyle found the recovery slow and frustrating.

She laughs at Neil's anecdote about timing herself in her wheelchair. She notes she only had the use of one arm and one leg to do it.

"I couldn't sit there, I had to do something. I drove my sister and my mother absolutely crazy because they had to lift me into the car, lift me out of the car and lift the wheelchair out—and it's heavy."

She began walking in October and got back on the bike for her first road ride in December. She was able to do this by working out at the Allan McGavin Sports Medicine Centre under the supervision of Dr. Jack Taunton, who ironically missed his first appointment with Goldstein because of a bike crash.

Cyclist Maria Lee of the Symmetrics racing team regularly competes against Goldstein. She too is amazed at Goldstein's recovery, noting her victories are even more astounding considering Goldstein has no teammates.

Goldstein rides for Mighty Rider, a bike shop on Broadway near Main. She joined Mighty Rider, which supplies her with all her equipment, after leav-

"Whatever I say won't mean anything. You have to go yourself and see. All I say is don't believe everything you see on TV, and don't take sides. Be neutral until you know for sure."

—Leah Goldstein

ing the Trek-Volkswagen team.

In a sport where riders wear portable radios to communicate with their coach and fellow riders to strategize, Lee describes Goldstein as a "lone wolf" who is difficult to beat.

In the May 7 Hatzic Valley race, the four-member Symmetrics team's plan was to stay with Goldstein to get one of their sprinters in place for the finish.

"She's still incredibly strong on the climbs. At the Hatzic Valley race [where Goldstein won by six minutes], she just blew it apart. She's just so strong that it's hard to keep her down. When she decides to go, there's not a heck of a lot you can do."

Having raced against her for three years, Lee says she hasn't really noticed a difference in Goldstein's ability on the bicycle. The 28-year-old agrees with Goldstein's assessment that she still hasn't reached her peak.

"This setback is just going to make her stronger. Isn't that scary? It scares us."

IF GOLDSTEIN CONTINUES to get better and her team qualifies for the 2008 Olympics, it will be big news in Israel.

When Goldstein spoke to the *Courier* before the 2004 Games, she noted the

possibility of a women's team competing for Israel sent that country's media into a frenzy.

Or, as she put it, "They've been all over us like swarming bees."

But never far from the excitement of patriotism is the reality of being an Israeli athlete and the danger it can bring. The terrible history of the 1972 Games, where 11 Israeli athletes were murdered, is an unpleasant reminder of some people's hate for Israel.

Politics is a sensitive topic for Goldstein, whose grandmother is a survivor of the Auschwitz prison camp. Her opinion on the ongoing struggle in the Middle East is obviously biased, she says, noting her service in the military gave her more insight than most people.

"Whatever I say won't mean anything. You have to go yourself and see. All I say is don't believe everything you see on TV, and don't take sides. Be neutral until you know for sure."

Two years ago, when Goldstein raced briefly for a French team, a suspicious man followed the team through France and Spain. The team wasn't sure what the man's interest was in Goldstein.

"Some guy was bugging my director, asking 'Who's the Israeli girl? Which one is the Jewish woman?' They didn't tell me that until I flew back to Canada because they didn't want me to freak out."

Leading up to the 2004 Olympics, Goldstein's Israeli cycling team had their jerseys designed with a purposely small Star of David on the shoulder, so not to attract attention.

At the time, coach Neil considered getting fitted for a bulletproof vest to wear at the Games. The team was to travel with armed guards, a likely scenario in 2008.

"You can't let it control your life or ruin your life," says Goldstein, whose military training involved the use of M16 and Uzi machine guns. "You just do it. I personally don't have a

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Determined cyclist makes concerned parents proud

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problem with it. I have never had anything serious happen directly to me, and I don't know what I would do or say if something did happen."

Politics aside, racing in the Olympics would be a proud moment for Goldsteins' parents Ahoova and Sam, who aren't surprised their daughter is back on the bike.

Sam, however, would have preferred his daughter quit cycling. When he visited her in the hospital in Oregon, he could hardly believe what Goldstein looked like.

"Unbelievable. I don't know how she is still alive. Everything was broken. I told her she's not racing again, that I'm very much against it, but what can I do? She won't give up."

Ahoova couldn't visit her daughter in Oregon because she was caring for her grandson. News of the crash upset her, but she knew her daughter would recover.

"She's very determined, and if she wants to do something, she will do it the best she can. That's the person she is. From the time she started to walk, she's always been very determined and very consistent in every thing she tries."

Ahoova and Sam proudly watched their daughter dominate the Hatzic Valley road race. They like seeing her fit and happy again, competing in a sport she loves. But Ahoova has a confession.

"It's not easy to watch, knowing what happened last year. But she's my daughter and I know she will do good."

BACK AT UBC's Thunderbird Park, Goldstein steps off her bike to take a seat on a rickety set of wooden grandstands.

She's been on the bike for four hours but doesn't look tired. Monday is her only day off, and she admits to being a bit grumpy on that day because she's not on her bike.

"You have to have an element of not being normal because think of what you're doing and how much you're training. You have to have something not right up there."

Goldstein launched her cycling career in Israel after a triathlete friend encouraged her to compete in a duathlon—a running and biking event. She won the race.

In her early 20s at the time, she continued to race and during a return to Vancouver a couple of years later she



Leah Goldstein on her way to victory at the May 7 Hatzic Valley road race. On Saturday, she won the road race and criterium in Enumclaw, Washington.

photo Greg Descantes

met up with the Canadian women's team while riding in Richmond.

Within two years of competing in Canada, she turned pro.

Now on a remarkable comeback, the former kickboxing champion-soldier-cop is proving, so far, that she made the right decision to continue with the sport.

"I don't ever want to say in my life

that I wish, I wish. I want to do everything I can when I can. I can't wait. Lot of people say, 'I wish I did this or I wish I did that when I was young', but I don't ever want to say that."

And with that, she hops on her bicycle and gets back on a road that she hopes will keep her safe, on the winner's podium and a little closer to the Olympics.