

By Brian Ackley

standing in the ring, knowing she had just defeated the most noted woman boxer in the world, Sumya Anani's circle of irony was complete.

Indeed, it was only fitting that after pummeling Christy Martin, Anani still could not be called the champ. The bout many – most assuredly Martin herself – thought would be a tune-up for *Sports Illustrated's* boxing cover girl had been a non-title event. Not that Martin actually held a title, but who cared? Since her magazine appearance in 1996, the Orlando, Fla., fighter had vaulted women's boxing from sideshow to good show.

In a boxing ring, a thousand miles from home, drenched in sweat, tired to the bone, Sumya Anani had completed a climb she could not predict, but knew would happen.

"When I get in the ring, I'm scared, but yet I'm so confident," Anani says. "I'm so calm because I know I'm here for the right reason, even if I don't completely understand it."

For the Shawnee resident, there is always a reason. A reason a life-long resident of the midwest is touted as boxing's "Island Girl", a reason she was the fighter to score one of boxing's biggest 1998 upsets, a reason her weapons in the ring are used to heal out of it.

"Synchronicity is a big thing, how I met my trainer, how I got into boxing," she says. "Before I was a fighter, when I'd go to work out, I'd wear boxer shorts. White with blue stripes. I still have them. When I was in second grade, I had a crush on this boy for five years. He was the fastest runner in the school. I always thought, 'if I could be the fastest runner' ... Even back then, athletes always inspired me."

"But I wouldn't say I was an athlete. I never competed in anything. I was too insecure. I thought only cool kids, only popular kids did it."

A practitioner and teacher of yoga, schooled in holistic medicine and massage therapy, wise to the vagaries of life, Anani confronted her biggest irony before ever stepping through the ropes.

"From a philosophical standpoint, in yoga, they talk a lot about balance, balancing the physical body with the mental body and the spiritual body," she says. "At first I was like, 'Oh my God, I can't box,' because there are some ethical things. One of the things of yoga is non-violence. And, I was like, boxing is so violent. It's a very raw sport. It's weird being in there. It's not like doing a one-two combination on the bag. You're in there with someone hitting you back. I was really confused. But to protect yourself is not a violent thing."

Anani does not go into the ring wanting to be violent. She wears colorful boxing outfits that match her warm and caring personality. She dotes over her 8-year old son, Matthew, whenever she can.

Fighting pays
the bills, but
there's more
to Sumya Anani
than knocking
out opponents

Photo by Mary Ann Owen



Kansas City's Island Girl



Sumya Anani, center, takes in some ringside action with her trainer, Barry Becker.

"He's my workout buddy," she bubbles. "My trainer would probably say that (Matthew) doesn't really get it, that I'm a boxer, that I could get hurt. But he knows I have to train. He knows my life is pretty disciplined, pretty structured. Do you know how many pushups he did today? He did 450 pushups. Monday he did 350." She laughs, she smiles, she has an unmistakable love of life.

Yet the brutality of her chosen sport is equally obvious. She's left many of her opponents with blackened eyes and bloody noses. Martin looked like she had gone 10 rounds with Ali, not Anani.

"I had awe, her name, and everything," says the 28-year-old, talking about

Martin. "I've seen her fight since I started boxing. I remember one time during the fight – and usually I don't have any flashes during the fight – we were both jabbing at the same time and I remember thinking 'Oh my God, I'm fighting Christy Martin.'"

She nearly kayoed the then "pound-for-pound" world champ in the third round, sending her to the canvas by what the referee called a slip, but what could have been ruled a knockdown. By round's end, Martin was pinned helplessly against the ropes, truly saved only by the bell.

"The third round, that really pumped me up," Anani says. "I was just another woman out there training and had an

opportunity. I never think I'm as good as anybody. I mean I don't want people to think I'm not confident, but I don't go in real cocky. But I train hard, I spar with amateurs and pros, men and women. If I can hit them, a lot of them are quicker than Christy, that gives you confidence."

Anani – who gets her ring moniker from two six-month stays in Jamaica – parlayed the win into a crowd-pleasing eight-round war with former amateur champion Denise Moraetes, featured on ESPN 2, earlier this year. A crushing fourth-round left hook put her undefeated opponent to the canvas, shining the spotlight on Anani once again.

"I would never have wanted to fight

her," says former professional fighter Sue "Tiger Lilly" Fox, a leading expert on women's boxing. "She's so tough, so focused. You can't believe how much she's improved, and in just a short period of time. She is such a good fighter right now. She completely amazes me.

"She went from fighting Christy Martin where she had some things she needed to work on – she was fighting up, she wasn't moving, bobbing and weaving, moving her body – to her next fight (Moraetes) where she gave a flawless performance. She was so in control it was scary."

Anani knows scary. She will be forever known as the fighter that beat Christy Martin. But no matter what her boxing future may hold – a rematch with Martin, an anticipated showdown with Lucia Rijker – she will also be forever known as the fighter that almost killed Katie Dallam. Her hands – the ones used to heal with her holistic methods – had ironically, tragically, done just the opposite.

Not, of course, that Anani could know any of what was going on with her then 37-year-old opponent, in the ring or out of it.

If Anani was a novice – it was just her fourth professional bout – Dallam was a neophyte. She had received her license to box the day before the December 12, 1996 fight, the same day she was in a car accident severe enough to send her trainer to the hospital.

"She fought until the very end. She was throwing and throwing, and throwing, I had no idea. I saw the blood coming from her nose, but that's so common," Anani says. "It didn't even phase me. I didn't understand it then, and I still don't. I know that it happened for a reason."

She rained nearly 120 blows to Dallam's head in seven minutes of boxing – a punch every four seconds. Shortly after returning to the dressing room, Dallam collapsed with a bleeding brain. While emergency surgery saved her life, Dallam was left unable to read, drive, sometimes unable to finish speaking a complete sentence. Doctors told the family to prepare for the worst. "I kept waiting

for the phone to ring to ask me if we wanted to donate the organs," her sister told the *Kansas City Star*.

Anani didn't know what had happened until the following day. She held hospital vigils, wrote letters, considered quitting the sport. To this day, she has not had contact with her.

"It kind of does bother me," Anani says. "I've talked to her lawyer a couple of times. She's making tremendous progress, but I'm trying to put myself in her shoes. I don't know what I'd do. But it was a boxing match, it's not like I was a drunk driver."

Ten bouts later, Anani remains perfect in the ring, 14-0. She is hoping to fight again in June as part of an all-women's pay-per-view boxing show.

"She needs to go to Rijker," says Fox of Rijker, regarded as the best in the world today. "Nobody is ever going to look at Sumya as the best until she fights Lucia, and proves herself against her. Right now, they are the two best out there, but everyone still thinks Rijker is No 1."

Of course, there were many who made the same claim about Martin.

"I'll carry the mantle if people want me to carry it," says Anani, who is also contemplating a second fight with Martin. "I would love (a rematch), but I don't see it. That's up to them. I'm on."

As for Rijker, Anani is impressed, but not intimidated. "Lucia is just a real pretty boxer. She's got good form and she's strong. She's found her calling."

Unable to shake the past, unwilling to predict the future; a final irony rooted in her simple outlook on life.

"I kind of go moment-by-moment," Anani says. "I don't look too far into the future. That's yoga right there, staying in the

here and now, being very aware of the present moment. It kind of grounds you."

Ironic indeed. J

Brian Ackley is a freelance writer based in Boston, N.Y. He meekly declined an invitation to go three rounds with Anani.



Even when she's weighing in for a fight, Sumya Anani can usually be found sporting a smile.

As good as Sumya Anani is, she's not the best fighter on the women's circuit. That honor goes to Lucia Rijker. With the help of former world-class fighter Sue "Tiger Lilly" Fox, JOX takes a look at the Top 10 female fighters going today. We also include the male fighter she most resembles in boxing style.

1

Lucia Rijker. Insiders consider her the best all-around skilled fighter in her division and she could easily be called the best pound-for-pound female boxer in the world. (male counterpart: Roy Jones Jr.)

2

Sumya Anani. The most flawless technical female fighter today. A good counter puncher, she loves it when her opponent moves forward. Her upset victory against Christy Martin was on par with Evander Holyfield beating Mike Tyson. Anani is willing to fight the best. (Holyfield)

3

Bridgett Riley. An attractive fighter with a wholesome image, "Baby Doll" hopes to reach the level of Oscar De La Hoya. And like De La Hoya, Riley is more than just a pretty face, possessing a nasty streak when in the ring. (De La Hoya)

4

Leah Mellinger. A bit shy in the power department, but has the slick skills necessary to outpoint sluggers and heavy-handed punchers. (Johnny Tapia)

5

Laura Serrano. Well-conditioned athlete with a good chin and relentless body attack. Bring a lunch pail when stepping in the ring with Serrano because you'll be there for a while. (Julio Cesar Chavez)

6

Regina Halmich. German-based boxer has dominated her mostly European challengers. It's hoped that she will soon be matched with Riley or Jolene Blackshear. (Dariusz Michalczewski)

7

Jane Couch. Strong, muscular fighter who utilizes her great strength to bulldoze through her opposition. Another fighter who can make it a long evening for an opponent. (Kosta Tszu)

8

Christy Martin. The "Coal Miner's Daughter" and former "Sports Illustrated" cover girl is more than willing to take a punch to land one. Has she had a fight where her nose wasn't bloodied? Win, lose or draw, Martin delivers excitement. (Arturo Gatti)

9

Lena Akesson. Clever fighter with great balance and ring presence. A classic standup fighter, she also possesses quick hands and feet. (Sugar Ray Leonard)

10

Melissa Salamone. Flashy stylist who couples solid power with good defense. Already has wins over some solid competition. (Pernell Whitaker)