

Weekend Forecast



Thursday

high 63/low 43



Friday

high 68/low 48

Saturday

high 73/low 52

Sunday

high 72/low 53

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Power Punch

SM North grad Sumya Anani wins the IBA Lightweight Championship

by Jerry Clair

Special to The Journal Herald

If you think kids who don't gain confidence through sports in school stand little chance of successful athletic pursuits later in life, don't tell that to 29-year-old Overland Park resident Sumya Anani, who, on May 11, became the IBA Women's Lightweight Boxing Champion, defeating Liz Mueller in Tulsa, Okla. Two-and-a-half years earlier, she defeated current WBC and WBA Champion Christy Martin in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Anani, now 17-1, recalled her own less than stellar years in school.

"I was never popular; never played sports in high school," she said. "I always thought cool kids did it. Not feeling worthy seemed to dominate my whole childhood. I think having a low self-esteem is one of the worst things - it's a disease in our society."

For years, the Minnesota native has been overcoming her adversity with both a tenacious spirit inside the ring, and a humble heart outside.

Although Anani began overcoming her adversity well before she turned to pro boxing, her real success occurred in August 1996 in Jamaica, where Barry Becker, her trainer and biggest supporter, discovered her raw talent. She explains the

unusual situation she was in when Becker finally convinced her to pursue her career.

"I'd known him for years before, and [he'd say] 'you should box,' but I never listened," she said. "He saw me wrestle this Jamaican down there, and that's when he got the notion that I could really do it. Then he really started pushing me hard, and didn't really ask me, he told me, 'you have a fight.'"

The road to the world championship was a long, painful, and draining one for Anani, who said all the "weight training, the bag work, all the rounds of shadow boxing, sparring - it just wears you out."

The "mental exhaustion" at times impeded her ability to stay focused, she said. The pressure also mounted as the date of the fight closed in.

But the blood, sweat and tears she endured would eventually pay off when she would obtain the championship belt.

Anani, 11-0 before her bout with Martin, said of her rival, "she was the most advertised woman boxer; she was considered the best by a lot of people."

A veteran of the boxing world, Becker has no qualms about his mission to cultivate a great fighter in Anani. Describing his overall strategy in shaping her line of attack, he said, "I teach defense first be-

see SUMYA ANANI page A2



photo by Kevin Burton/The Journal Herald

Although Sumya Anani (right) began overcoming adversity well before she turned to pro boxing, her real success occurred in August 1996 in Jamaica, when Barry Becker (left), her trainer and biggest supporter, discovered her raw talent.

SUMYA ANANI ... from front

fore anything else. If you learn the bad habits first, it's hard to correct. I taught her how to hit and not be hit. Now she's hitting people; they don't know where the punches are coming from. That's the trick."

What's the next level for Anani? Although she hasn't set her sights on a specific goal, this spirited fighter is training as hard as ever for any new challenge.

"We came down a weight class for this fight," she said. "I don't know if I'm going to stay at this weight class. I had to cut my carbohydrates, which is my energy source, so I was feeling a lot weaker training for this (Mueller) fight than I had felt for any fight. I feel good at 140 where I fought Christy Martin. It just depends on what opportunities come up, what fights we get."

Both Anani and Becker are aware of the dilemma they face in relying on big time promoters like Don King, who have connections with the less-than-pure elements of our society.

"We're trying to make it on our own without people like Don King, who has given her offers to fight," said Becker. She doesn't like alcohol, and doesn't want to be sponsored by anybody who promotes the use of it. Becker conceded however, that to gain exposure, she might have to enter the glamour world of big money advertising.

But Anani, holding fast to her convictions, disagreed with her trainer.

"No!" she exclaimed. "If kids look up to me, and here I am - look what I'm holding. I don't drink. There's too much alcohol consumption in our society. I will take less money, and be sponsored by the Wild Oats. It's not about the money for me. I haven't made in almost five years of boxing \$35,000. Christy Martin makes \$150,000 a fight!"

"But not having a big time promoter like that, you may never go anywhere either," replied her trainer, "even though she's the World Champion!! It's scary she could never help people unless she has the money to help people."

Anani has drawn inspiration from well-known athletes such as those who competed in the Olympics, and former Royals' third baseman George Brett, who demonstrated tremendous physical and mental discipline. She said the body is capable of doing amazing things, but needs the power of the mind to win at the highest levels, and it's great "just to have that

'yes I can do it' attitude.

The young fighter manages to escape from the rigors of training by teaching yoga classes and spending quality time with her son. While her child provides a refreshing escape, the yoga provides both a release from the stress of her daily regimen and maintenance of her mental and physical health.

"People think of it in terms of flexibility," she said. "But yoga is about training your mind - quieting the chatter of the mind; it's helping me with my focusing, staying injury free. With all the weight training, and hitting the bags, yoga's - the softer side, the feminine side, [which] rounds me out."

Anani said no one has "specifically" told her she can't achieve her goals because of her gender; however, she does lament the fact that the fairer sex hasn't received the billing they deserve in this sport.

"It's hard for us to get airtime on T.V.," she said. "Two or three years ago, there used to be a whole women's fight card."

The champion wants to convey her message of perseverance, confidence, and spirit to all youngsters who aspire to become the best they can be. Young people need to discover their passions and "stick to" them, she said, "no matter who says you're not good at it or you can't do it. Just find out who you are, and trust yourself, trust your instincts."

Becker, like all excellent trainers, is always looking for areas of improvement to make his student reach her fullest potential.

"Too nice," he said of the IBA champ. "I need for her to be more vicious in the ring. She would rather not hurt the girl, but the game is take her head off, I'm sorry, but you have to beat her up; put her away, knock her down, face down - you have to train that way, you have to fight that way - this is the real thing."

While many fighters express, at best, lukewarm comments about their trainers, Anani cherishes being mentored by Becker.

"He's been everything to me," she said. "I wouldn't be here without him. I couldn't imagine stepping into the ring without him stepping in behind me. He's my trainer; he motivates me more than anybody has in my whole life; he's been my main role model."

Although Anani is undecided about staying in boxing in three to five years, she's passionate about someday being a "crusader for the environment" and a fighter for children's causes by assisting organizations like St. Jude.

"I want to be remembered as somebody who gave it everything I could be somebody who was a good person, and tried to help and inspire people to reach their potential, whatever it is," she said.

"She's definitely a giver, and not a taker," said Becker.

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