

# THE KANSAS CITY STAR MAGAZINE

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## THE FOOD ISSUE

18 PAGES OF LOCAL MEATS, SWEETS  
AND OTHER GOOD-TO-EATS  
(Who knew Kansas City was  
so delicious?)

THE MAG INTERVIEW: LEARNING TO 'FLY' WITH AN EX-WORLD CHAMPION BOXER, 26



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION  
BY JOHN MUTRUX |  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

# THIS EX-BOXER STRETCHES HERSELF

Sumya Anani of Overland Park is a former world champion female boxer. Now Anani teaches yoga, aerial yoga and circus arts at Learning2Fly, 4711 Lamar Ave. in Mission, [www.IAmLearning2Fly.com](http://www.IAmLearning2Fly.com). This conversation took place at her studio, which is inside a white geodesic dome visible from Interstate 35 at Lamar Avenue.

**How do you pronounce your first name?**

Su-MY-uh. My father is from Palestine. It's a very popular name there.

**What are these different fabrics hanging down from the ceiling above the thick foam mats?**

These ones are hammocks that we use for aerial yoga. You can sit in them and lean back into different postures to elongate the spine. And the hammock supports you in back bends and other inversions so you are not putting so much pressure on the shoulders and wrists.

These are silks; they hang down in pairs. You climb them — that takes more strength than the aerial yoga — and create holds for your feet so you can hang out away from the fabric.

**When were aerial silks invented? I don't remember anything like this when I was growing up.**

It's pretty new. It's only been around 20 or 30 years on the coasts. This is the first circus center of its kind in Kansas City.

**When you say circus, do you mean**

**like Cirque du Soleil?**

Yes; I never liked the trained animal component of traditional circuses. We also have ropes and trapezes.

**You were a world champion boxer. How did you get the idea to box professionally?**

My trainer Barry Becker inspired me. I met him at Bally's gym. He said, "You should do something with those muscles other than just look good. You should box." I was 21 at the time. Then I moved to Jamaica for two years, and when I moved back, he came to my house and said, "I got you a fight." I had no car, no money, a young son, and I was living with my mom. I thought, "OK. Four hundred dollars, that could help."

**How did the first fight go?**

I won.

**How long did you fight?**

About 11 years. My son, Matthew Anani, just won the Kansas City Novice Golden Gloves championship in the 165-pound weight class in the 17-to-34 age group. That's kind of rare, mother and

son boxing champions.

**What titles did you win?**

Four world championships in three different weight classes between 2001 and 2007, when I retired.

**Is the world championship in boxing like the World Series, where it's basically just the U.S.?**

(Laughs.) No, it's the world. I fought girls from England and all over.

**What are the worst injuries you sustained?**

You know, black eyes.

**Did you ever break your nose?**

I think somebody broke my nose sparring. It got swollen. But I don't have any problems with breathing.

**Did you lose any teeth?**

No, got all my teeth. It's because my trainer was such a good defensive trainer. A lot of people do get hit a lot, but I didn't.

**How did you transition from boxing to aerial fitness?**

I was in Colorado and ran across an aerial festival where teachers come from around the world to teach classes — a lot of Cirque du Soleil performers are there.

**How did yoga come into the picture?**

I was doing yoga before I started boxing, and I know it helped me. Yoga addresses the body's need to be strong and be flexible but it also addresses your mind and your spirit. Once we see that we can transform our physical body, that empowers us to think, OK, maybe I can forgive my mother. Maybe I can go back to college and get a degree. Maybe I can.

**I know a lot of women and very few men who have tried yoga. Men I know say they don't want to do it because they aren't flexible enough. What is your best argument for why men should do yoga?**

It's simple: How are you going to get flexible if you don't practice? If you want to be good at programming computers, practice. If you want to be more flexible, practice.

**If a man is strong why is it also important for him to be flexible?**

It's two sides of the same coin: Longer muscles ultimately are stronger muscles. If all you're doing is going to the gym and constantly pumping iron you are just contracting and contracting your muscles and they get short and that's how you rip an Achilles tendon.

It's the opposite for women. Women are afraid of the weight room because they are afraid of getting muscle-y. But you need strong muscles. You're not going to get bulky if you lift weights, unless you take steroids, because you don't have those hormones.

**You look really good for a retired boxer. How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?**

Not at all. I'm 59. (Pause, then laughter.) Where's my camera? You should see your face. I'm 39.

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