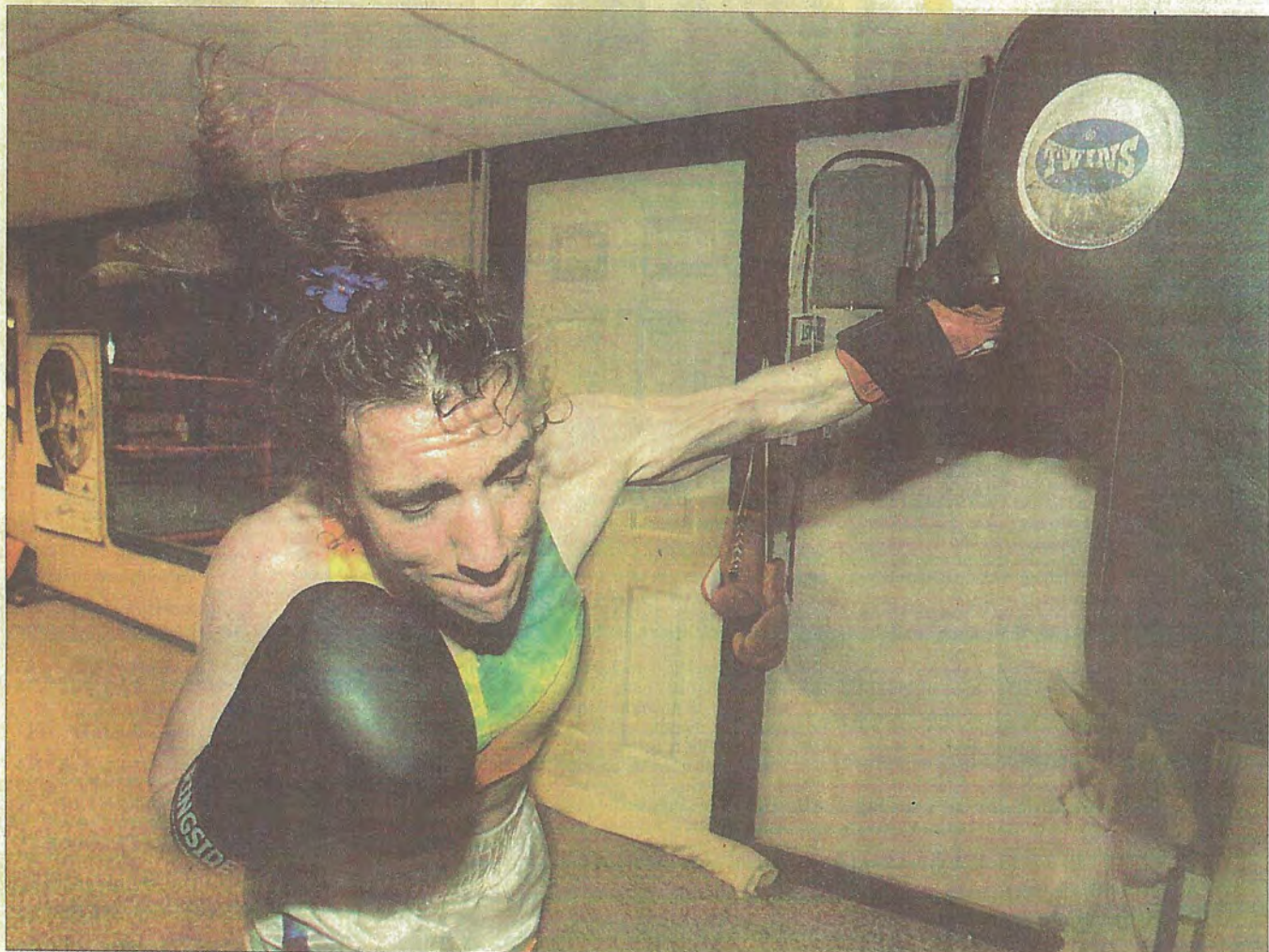


# A labor of gloves



Top-ranked Sumya Anani (above) took a drink with some help from her son, Matthew, before resuming her workout (below) in the basement of her Johnson County home.



Photos by JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star



**JOE  
POSNANSKI**  
Commentary

**KC-area  
fighter  
learns  
boxing  
is tough  
business  
as she  
waits for  
next bout**

**ROUND 1**  
This is a basement. It is in an ordinary-looking house on a street in Johnson County. There's a full-sized boxing ring. And there's a massage table. There are four championship boxing belts. And there's a mother hugging her son. "Hands that bruise," Sumya Anani says. "And hands that heal."

**ROUND 2**  
This is a carpet salesman. Barry Becker fought Golden Gloves when he was young because he had a lot of violence in him. When he was not fighting in the ring, he was fighting on

the street.

"It was safer then," he says. "Nobody used knives or guns."

Even after Barry left the fight game and went into the carpet business, boxing simmered inside him. He felt most at ease around fighters. He was always on the lookout for a fighter he could mold. He spotted a 22-year-old woman while working out at the gym. "You could tell she was strong," he says.

What he could not tell then was that the woman, Sumya Anani (pronounced Soo-MA-ya Ah-NA-nee) was also as gentle as the wash cycle for

woolens. She dealt blackjack at a casino, and her stomach hurt for the people who lost. She worked as a massage therapist because she had this notion about comforting people. She spent her hours away from work taking her son, Matthew, ("My soulmate," she says) to bookstores, where she read softly to him.

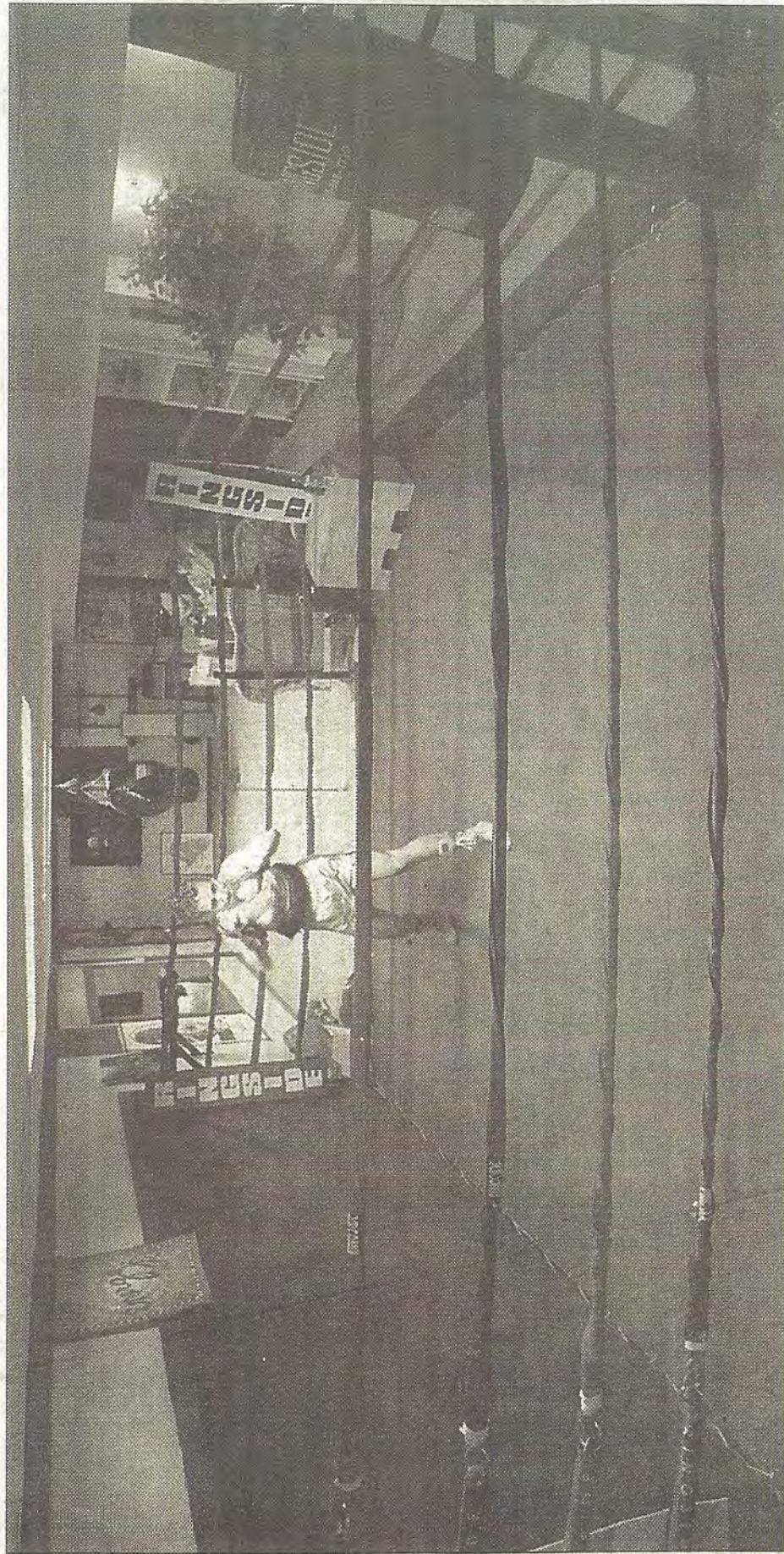
"You should be a fighter," Barry told her.

She laughed at him. She studied yoga. She wrote long journal entries about her place in the world.



**THE KANSAS CITY STAR.**  
**Thursday, February 26, 2004**

# SPORTS



JOHN SLEEZER/The Kansas City Star

**You would expect one of the top women boxers in the world to be working out in a gym under the watchful eyes of trainers and managers. But Kansas City-area fighter Sumya Anami goes through her workouts in a ring in the basement of her home.**



# BOXER: It's been a tough fight for Anani

Continued from D-1

"I know I am here for a reason, and I know it has something to do with helping people," she says.

Sumya went to Jamaica for a year. Barry came down to visit her once, and he found her on the beach, wrestling with a local legend everyone called "The Fire Man." She says it was all in good fun. He says she grabbed him and would not let go.

When she arrived back home in Kansas City, Barry called.

"I've set up a fight for you," he told her. "It's in three weeks."

## ROUND 3

This is part of an interview with Sumya Anani, now 32, and Barry Becker.

Q: What has boxing done for you?

Sumya: Well, I definitely think it's changed me. It's made me more confident. It's...

Barry: I've finally convinced this girl that she's a killer. It's taken me years. She didn't know how good she was. I would tell her, "Nobody can beat you." She didn't believe me. She didn't have that killer instinct. Sumya's a good person. It has taken me years to tell her that's fine, but in the ring she's a predator. She's unstoppable.

Sumya: Barry has worked on me. It did not come easily for me. I believe in...

Barry: She's a predator.

## ROUND 4

This is a hospital room. Sumya Anani sat in the waiting room just outside and wrote a long letter to Katie Dallam, who was inside struggling for life. This was December 1996, and the two had fought hours earlier in the smoky St. Joseph's firefighter's union hall for a few hundred dollars. Dallam, a 37-year-old with a master's degree from Missouri, was fighting her very first fight. Anani was fighting her fourth.

Few people knew Dallam had been in a car accident the night before.

Dallam was told that she would be protected. She cleared the cursory pre-fight physical. And then Anani's non-stop, windmilling style of fighting overwhelmed her — Dallam was, at one point, hit with 12 consecutive blows to the head. In all, Anani hit Dallam in the head 119 times. The referee did not stop the fight. It ended when Joe Gallejos, Dallam's trainer, threw in the towel.

After the fight, Dallam collapsed in the dressing room. Her brain bled.

By the time Anani heard about it and rushed to the hospital, Dallam was in a coma, strapped to a respirator. Doctors were trying to repair a torn vein on the top of her brain.

Anani sat in the waiting room, somewhere beyond tears. She wrote a letter to Katie, and she wrote and wrote and wrote, wild, rambling sentences about life and friendship and faith and hope. Katie made it through the surgery. Her life was altered forever. She was not quite the same. But she survived.

Sumya Anani wanted to quit boxing.

"You have to keep fighting," Barry told her. "You owe it to yourself."

## ROUND 5

This is a yoga class. Sumya Anani teaches yoga to adults. More,

though, she teaches yoga to children. That's her pride. She tries to awaken something inside them. She tells her students to move beyond their fears, their worries, their anger.

"Release," she says.

"I love helping people. It's so hard for people to let go of their pain."

## ROUND 6

This is War Memorial Auditorium in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. This is where Sumya Anani fought Christy Martin in December 1998. Anani had been in awe of Martin. It was the *Sports Illustrated* cover featuring Martin — "The Lady Is A Champ" — that inspired her to fight in the first place (Barry had held up the cover and screamed, "This could be you").

The two were supposed to fight earlier in Las Vegas, on a big fight card on Showtime. It was to be Anani's big boxing break. It didn't turn out that way. Martin's people called her early in the morning to disrupt her sleep. They tried to play games with her mind. And then, minutes before the fight, Martin pulled out, claiming fever.

"You will still fight us, right?" Becker asked her at ringside.

"That's like calling me chicken," Martin screamed. And then, according to Becker, she reached up and started choking Becker.

So, months later there wasn't much awe left in Anani as she faced off against Martin in a rescheduled fight in front of a small crowd on an obscure cable channel. Martin was still the most famous woman boxer in the world. But Anani unleashed, and Martin never knew what hit her. Barely a minute into the fight, Anani drew blood. By the end, Martin was battered and puffy and lost. It was called by some the most thrilling fight of the year, men or women. Even though the fight was promoted by Don King, and televised by Don King, and controlled by Don King, and Martin was the jewel of Don King's women's boxing stable, Anani won a split decision. It was Martin's first loss in nine years.

"Everything's going to change for us now, baby," Barry Becker shouted in joy.

Only something strange happened: Nothing really changed.

## ROUND 7

This is Matthew's friend from school. He cannot believe that Matthew's mother is boxing champion of the world. Nobody who meets Sumya can believe she is a boxer. And everybody knows moms don't fight. Sure, the record shows that Anani now had 22 victories, one loss and one draw, and that she has twice avenged her one loss to 6-foot intimidator Britt Van Buskirk ("I was scared when I fought her the first time," Anani admits). The record shows that she has won her last three fights — over highly ranked opponents — by technical knockout.

Of course, it's not that easy for anybody, especially a 13-year-old kid, to find accurate records in women's boxing.

"This is the guy," Matthew says as he brings his friend to the basement. Sumya shows him her four championship belts (in three different weight classes). She shows him the violence with which she hits the heavy bag. He is suitably impressed.

"Come on," Sumya says. "Let's go upstairs and get something to eat."

## ROUND 8

This is women's boxing. All boxing has trouble with legitimacy these days — fewer seem to care. The sport has become too nakedly violent for many, too corrupt for others. There are too many champions, and also too few. There are fewer stars, fewer big fights, fewer fights on television.

And women's boxing has its own troubles beyond men's. Many think women should not fight. Many get sickened by the sight of it. The sport has tried to sell itself with sex (one of women's boxing's big stars, Mia St. John, posed in *Playboy*) and blood ("The great thing about women boxing is none of these girls knows how to defend herself," one prominent promoter says) and name recognition. By far the biggest star in women's boxing today is Laila Ali, daughter of Muhammad Ali. She has the bloodlines and the good looks but has not overwhelmed anyone with her boxing ability.

"It's all about marketing," Becker says.

He wants Anani to market herself better. She calls herself "The Island Girl" and wears tie-dyed shirts. She has four championship belts and that coveted victory over Martin in her prime. One boxing magazine ranked her the second-best fighter in the world behind Ali.

Still she has not fought since last April (when she scored a TKO over Fredia Gibbs in the first round). She can't get a rematch with Martin, she can't get a much-coveted fight with undefeated Dutch boxer Lucia Rijker (a fight that at least one women's boxing Internet board — there are such things — calls the "fight we most want to see"). She can't get on Laila Ali's radar screen, partly because Ali outweighs her by more than 20 pounds.

"This is the strangest sport,"

Anani says. "You want to be the best, but if you get too good, nobody will fight you."

"You gotta market yourself better," Becker scolds.

"I know," she says. "But I'm not going to pose nude or anything like that."

## ROUND 9

This is part of an interview with Barry Becker and Sumya Anani.

Q: Does it bother you that you haven't had a fight in while?

Sumya: Of course, it upsets me some...

Barry: It's killing me. You understand? It's killing me. I've got the baddest girl in the whole world here. I know it. The baddest girl in the world. And I can't get anyone to fight her. I can't get...

Sumya: I don't like when you call me the baddest girl in the world. I mean, that's not why...

Barry: See, this is what I mean. She won't market herself. She's so nice. She's so modest. But you should see this girl hit. I told her 18 months ago she needed to start knocking people out. That's how she would get fights. So, she's knocked out the last three girls she fought.

Q: What do you think of wom...

Barry: She can knock people out with both hands. I'm telling you. She comes at you, and it's over. I've never seen anything like it. She's like a tank...

Sumya: I think he was asking a question.

Barry: I'm sorry. It's just that I get so excited talking about Sumya.

Sumya: I know. I think it upsets us both. You are always told that in sports, if you're the best, everything will work out. Well, now we can't get a fight. We can't get a payday. We can't get on television.

Barry: You just can't know what it's like. I've got the greatest thing in boxing. I know it. I know it with all my heart. And it's like I can't get her on stage. It's killing me.

Q: Would you fight Christy Martin again?

Sumya: Of course I would...

Barry: She wouldn't fight us.

There's no way. She's too scared.

Sumya: You know, I think when I beat Christy Martin, I wasn't ready for everything.

Barry: Her punches weren't crisp as they are now. She wasn't throwing hooks like she is now.

Sumya: No, I don't mean boxing. I mean, I wasn't ready mentally and spiritually. For fame. For the attention. Whatever you want to call it. I think now I'm ready.

Barry: You better believe she's ready. She has power in both hands. She attacks. She never lets up...

## ROUND 10

This is the final round. Nobody knows how this fight will turn out. There are people — including Emanuel Steward, one of the great trainers in boxing history — who have shown interest in promoting Sumya Anani. There are observers who believe that Anani is simply too good to be ignored for long. "Sumya is probably the best woman fighter I ever saw," says Harold Lederman, a longtime boxing judge and HBO boxing analyst.

But in this basement, Anani works out every day — except those days when she is giving a client a massage here — while Becker rants and makes calls and pushes his fighter. Neither one knows whether good things will happen.

"Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength," Anani says. She is quoting St. Francis of Sales. Anani collects quotes.

"I like quotes from Gandhi and Martin Luther King," she says.

She does believe boxing will lead her to something bigger. She has started a group, ACT (Awakening Change Together), and they meet monthly and try to make the world a little better. They clean the house of a woman with cancer. They work in a soup kitchen.

"I know I'm supposed to make the world a better place," she says. "And I know boxing will lead to me what I'm supposed to do with my life."

Then she points to a poster on the wall by the boxing ring. It's of Bruce Lee, the kung-fu master. She points to the sign of the yin and the yang and explains how life is about balance — light and darkness, violence and healing, warmth and chills.

"People talk to me and they wonder how I can be a fighter, but we all have our different sides," she says. "We all have our nurturing side and our aggressive side, and it's all about balance."

Barry listens as she talks. He nods.

"I'm telling you," he says, "this girl can really punch. She'll knock your lights out."