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WEEKLY



girls with gloves

Women's boxing
moves closer to
becoming the
main event.

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FIGHTING THE BALANCE

Sumya Anani takes an unusual, championship-winning approach to women's boxing

by Grace Hood

When it comes to describing her decade-long boxing career, Sumya Anani (pronounced Sue-my-ya A-nah-ni) hears the same story over and over again from the press. The story goes something like this: Anani is a successful four-time world champion, and every girl in women's boxing is afraid to fight the 140-pound competitor. Despite her repeated challenges to other fighters last year, the most feared fighter in 2005 could only rustle up one fight, which she won, in January of that year.

While she feels these elements are important, Anani says they don't paint the whole picture of her athletic career.

"I'm always trying to tell people about yoga and how to balance," says the 33-year-old massage therapist and yoga instructor. "We have this aggression in all of us. It's about finding the right outlet for it and how to balance the polarities of yoga and boxing. No one picks up on that."

For many, boxing and yoga may seem like polar opposites. One requires aggression and combativeness, while the other suggests inner calm and flexibility. In an effort to

share her unique perspective, and visit one of her favorite vacation spots, Anani will travel to Boulder to teach a weekend-long workshop Feb. 23-25 and combine the two sports with weight training to teach fitness enthusiasts new ideas for cross training.

While yoga and boxing may be worlds apart, balancing the two has been a life-long mission for Anani—and a key element to the success of her athletic career.

"Yoga's all about the study of yourself and the study of your mind—it's all about transformation. To me, boxing is that same study," she says. "It's a spiritual art of studying your thoughts, seeing why you react the way you do, how

you can become a better person."

Warrior

Perhaps more mystifying than the combination of boxing and yoga is how Anani ended up with the ring name of "Island Girl," given that she's lived most of her life in Kansas. The title has to do with a memorable two-year stay in Jamaica.

"I had gotten an opportunity to work there [with massage therapy], and it was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up," she says. "My son wasn't in school at the time, and I knew that I didn't want him to go to school down there."

In Jamaica, Anani was visited twice by a group of friends from Kansas, one of whom was her future boxing coach Barry Becker. A casual acquaintance, Becker encouraged Anani for years to box professionally. Having had a successful amateur boxing career himself, he felt Anani could hold her own in the challenging sport. Becker brought a copy of *Sports Illustrated* during his second visit to Jamaica. On the cover was a picture of Christy Martin, a popular female fighter at the time.

"Christy Martin was a world champion when Sumya started. She was the best woman fighter in the world," says Becker. "I told Sumya before she started. I showed her that cover and said, 'You can beat her someday.'"

Anani says she had her reservations while in Jamaica. When she returned to Kansas, she discovered that Becker

**For love
of the
game
Women's
boxing finds
its audience**

by Grace Hood

As shown by the popularity of *Million Dollar Baby*, interest in women's boxing has grown in recent years. For Ken Weiss, president of Rock & Sock Productions, a company that promotes women's boxing matches, business couldn't be better. Weiss's company used to promote both men's and women's matches together, but he says he started to notice something intriguing about the audience reaction to women's boxing matches.

"The audience responded in a much more enthusiastic, excited way than they did to any of the men's fights on the card—including the main event. That's with not having a clue who either of these women are," he says.

Weiss switched the focus of his promotion company one year ago to women's matches. In addition to promoting 2,000- to 3,000-seat matches across the country, his company launched a TV series, *A Ring of Their Own*, which is aired on Comcast and Dish Network. The series was so successful that it went from monthly to weekly installments, says Weiss.

"We're looking at a sport that's significantly grown in television, significantly grown in the size of the audiences that come to see it," he says.

"It's significant in the sense that audiences of the shows like it enough to come back. Every venue we've worked at has come back and asked us to do another show."

Weiss says that both men and women are drawn to the sport because it's so action-packed and entertaining.

"It's not a cat fight, it's a serious sport. Big, tough guys coming to boxing shows, looking at a woman half their size know that the woman could beat them up. That's a good thing," he says. "It's sort of fun."

Weiss says that the two-minute rounds in women's boxing make the sport more interesting than men's boxing, which has three-minute rounds.

"They don't have as much time to strategize. They have to go in and be there every minute of the fight," he says. "The action goes from the moment the bell rings to the moment that the bell ends."

This stands in contrast to men's boxing, which allow boxers more time for less-than-exciting boxing moves such as "the waltz."

What makes women's boxing unique from other professional women's sports, says Weiss, is that the boxers involved are driven purely by their interest in the sport.

"Women go into boxing not for the money or the glory," he says. "They go into it because they love the sport. They want to win."

Weiss says he sees a promising future for the sport. Many are hopeful that the Olympic Commission will soon accept women's boxing as a competitive sport, despite the fact that it still remains illegal in some countries.

And while other women's professional sports like the WNBA were met with lukewarm support, Weiss says that other women's sports have thrived commercially.

"If you go back to women's tennis, there was a time when the clothing they wore was under scrutiny. But if you look at it now, women's tennis is arguably more popular than men's. The LPGA clearly is on par with men's. When the LPGA does their big championships on TV, people also watch," he says.

And while there are lingering perceptions among some who think that the sport falls into the same category as female mud wrestling, Weiss says the group is a small one.

"I think by having continuous TV coverage it will show people who may tune in for other reasons that they're very good and entertaining to watch," he says. "The women don't disappoint." **WJ**



"Mental is more important than the physical."

—Sumya Anani

had signed her up for a boxing match with three weeks to train. Working three jobs in 1996, raising a son, and living with her mom, cash-strapped Anani admits that the \$400 cash reward from the fight was a huge draw.

"I was waitressing, doing massage therapy and teaching yoga. I had to build my clients back up. I never thought that, 'OK, in 10 years I'm still going to be fighting professionally,'" she says.

After only three weeks of training, Anani entered her first fight and debuted as a professional boxer with the ring name Island Girl. While today it's more unusual for a female boxer to start out in the professional ranks, it was more common back in the '90s. What was unusual both then and now is that Anani started the sport at the age of 24, which is relatively late compared to other boxers.

To both Anani and Becker's surprise, their first opponent turned out to be a fairly advanced fighter, one who had a respectable 5-2 record.

"She was from Springfield, Mo., and we heard that she was the toughest girl in Springfield," says Anani. "It scared us both."

Another obstacle for Anani was dealing with the spotlight. Anani says that she's been shy all her life and at that time wasn't prepared for all the attention.

"I shared a room with three or four other fighters [at the event]. They were out in the audience talking, and I was hiding in the back," she says. "I was scared to death, and I still am."

But once Anani entered the ring, she found her worries went away. After three two-minute rounds, Anani and her opponent were dead even. Becker remembers pulling Anani aside before the fourth and final round for a pep talk.

"I told her, 'Sumya, you have to go all out, you have to not quit. Stay on her. If you keep her on her heels, you're better than her. That's what you have to do this round. That's the only way we can win this fight,'" says Becker. "She looked at me and said, 'I'm a warrior,' and she took it to this girl. I swear, that's the coolest thing I've ever heard in my life."

Feminine meets masculine

Anani found her first win to be a huge confidence booster. While she relied heavily on her strength and athletic ability for her first match, challenges in subsequent matches pushed her to rely more on elements she commonly used in yoga practice.

In her fourth fight, Anani boxed Katie Dallam, whose skills some observers claim did not match Anani's. After Anani's relatively easy victory, Dallam fainted in her dressing room due to a major cranial bleed. Dallam was rushed to the hospital for surgery and has spent years recovering from the fight. To this day, Dallam has not been able to return to boxing.

"When I first heard about it, I thought it was a boxing injury, and thought, 'Oh, my God, I'm done. This is not what I'm about,'" she says. "Her family and her have been

through hell. She had to relearn how to walk, and she still has long-term memory loss."

If anything, it brought home the message that boxing is a high-stakes sport.

"This is not tennis. If you lose at tennis, you go home, you take your ball and racket," she says. "You get in the ring, you're getting hit."

Anani learned several weeks later that Dallam had been in a car accident with her trainer the night before. The accident was so severe that the trainer was required to stay overnight in a hospital for observation. During the required pre-fight physical, Dallam did not disclose that she had been in the accident.

"The question I always ask is, 'Why was she in the ring after the car wreck?' We get a pre-fight physical. If they would have known that her trainer was in the hospital overnight because of a car wreck, they wouldn't have let her fight," she says. "I don't understand and never will, and will always question it."

While the life-and-death experience might have been crippling for many fighters, Anani has come to terms with it and believes that the car accident had something to do with Dallam's brain injury. The experience also reaffirmed the importance of Anani's coach, Barry Becker, who has guided her safely through many professional obstacles.

"He's my biggest fan. I owe him so much," she says. "Not only for teaching me how to fight, but for his support. I could never get into the ring without him."

Perhaps even more intimidating than the bittersweet victory was the challenge posed to Anani in a 2001 fight against Britt Van Buskirk.

The source of intimidation?

"My trainer and I were standing in the room, and we asked, 'Where is she?' A guy whispered, 'She's right over there.' We looked over, and we said, 'Is this a girl?'"

Van Buskirk couldn't have been more a caricature of the stereotypes commonly assigned to female boxers: deep-voiced, masculine, with perhaps a few hairs on the chin. It wasn't the athletic challenge that put Anani to task in this fight, but rather the mental bout Anani struggled through when she thought she was boxing a man.

"I'm a fighter. I'm in the top of the women's game," she says. "But if you put me in the ring with a man that's on the top in the world, he'll kill me—there's no comparison. They're physically stronger, and they have more experience. It psyched me out."

Thus far, it has been the only loss of her 10-year career. Since the ill-fated 2001 match, Anani fought Van Buskirk two additional times and won. While the defeat stung, Anani says she learned a lot from the match.

"Mental is more important than physical. That's the same in yoga; it's not the body, it's the mind," she says. "All these years of studying yoga, and this is how I learn it."

Despite the fact that some female boxers fit into the old stereotypes, Anani says that the face of women's boxing has changed dramatically over the years.

"I've seen all these beautiful women doing it—there are mothers who do it," she says. "It's not like you have to

be masculine."

Anani says she encounters questions as to whether women have the requisite combativeness needed in boxing.

"Studying yoga all these years, I've come to an understanding that there are feminine and masculine within all of us. I'm a woman in this life, but I also have the masculine characteristic of aggression. Men have the feminine characteristic of nurturing. To me, it's about balancing these forces," she says.

For Anani, the question of balance can be applied beyond one's own personal experience.

"Right now we live in a male-dominated society. You look on the global scale at the destruction—to me it's the epitome of the imbalance of the masculine energy," she says. "We need more feminine characteristics involved in the global scale."

No Super Bowl

Two years into her professional boxing career, Anani faced what had been a career-long dream: a fight with Christy Martin. Even better, the fight was to be broadcast on the Showtime channel. Finally, Anani thought her hard work and preparation were going to pay off.

Anani flew to Las Vegas where the fight was to take place and was sitting in her dressing room, making final preparations for her fight, when the phone rang.

"I couldn't believe the phone call when it got it," she says. "Sure people get injured, but not two hours before the fight."

Martin backed out of the fight due to illness.

However, Anani questions to what extent the sudden illness was due to her strong record, particularly her knockout of Stacy Prestage, an opponent that Martin had struggled to conquer in a previous match.

"I have a copy of the whole event. You can see her ringside with Don King [Martin's promoter]. They're arguing," says Anani. "The announcer pointed the camera at her and said, 'Look, it's Christy Martin, looks like she has yellow fever. There she is talking to Don King.'"

The experience introduced Anani to what would be an increasingly important, and debilitating, factor to her rise in women's boxing: name-recognition, image and marketing.

Anani fought Martin in a rematch one month later, but it took place in Florida and was broadcast on an obscure cable channel. Anani dominated the match, but her win didn't get the attention it would have gotten in Las Vegas. According to trainer Becker, Anani's advantage comes from her level of focus, her energy and her emphasis on defense.

"She switches from right-handed to left-handed. She's got her chin buried way down in her chest underneath her shoulders and she doesn't get hit in the vital areas. Sumya just kept coming and backing her up," says Becker. "At that time, Christy had already been boxing nine years and was a world boxing champion. We have the film, it's the best women's fight I've ever seen in my life."

After the fight, Anani was offered a contract with Martin's promoter, Don King. While for many fighters, a contract with King would be a dream, Anani declined the offer, in part because it wasn't as extensive as Anani had hoped for, says Becker.

"She didn't think she needed to sign with him after she beat someone like Christy Martin," says Becker. "She thought that all just needed to be was the best."

However, in the world of women's boxing, determining who's "the best" is somewhat subjective. There is no annual championship like the Super Bowl or the World Series to prove which athletes have superior athletic ability in the sport of boxing. Because promoters schedule boxing matches, boxers can choose whom they want and don't want to fight. This makes it easier to manage wins, losses and the ever-important image for boxers. In the case of Christy Martin, the cancellation in Las Vegas was a smart way to manage her exposure and what appeared to be a potentially severe loss on national television, says Anani.

Name recognition is another important element to the sport, says Anani. While Christy Martin can expect a fee of \$75,000 for a fight, Anani's purse is around \$4,000. A profile on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and the *Roseanne Show* contribute to the disparity between the two fighters' purse fees, says Anani. For Laila Ali, the daughter of Muhammad Ali, having a household name boosts her reputation and fight fees. In short, while athletic ability and talent matters in women's boxing, it's not everything.

Women's boxing has a long way to go before it can recognize athletes purely based on talent, says Anani.

"In football, the No. 1 team at the end of the year, they get the Super Bowl. They have a chance to be recognized as the best," she says. "Women's boxing doesn't have that final event. It's bad for the fighters and terrible for the fans because a lot of them don't know what's going on. They may not know the behind-the-scenes stuff."

Discipline time

Having a better understanding of how to navigate the sport, Anani says that making press kits and reaching out to the media is all part of her job as a professional boxer. Should she be so lucky as to reach the national exposure level of Ali or Martin, Anani says she would never take her situation for granted.

"I'm seeing how judgmental I was being of all these athletes who were getting all this exposure and attention, and what were they doing with it? They have this platform, and they're not using it to promote global issues. They're just pro-

moting themselves," she says. "I could highlight some of the things that are wrong and promote healing in the world."

Anani wants to advocate more community involvement, working around environmental issues and reducing problems like drug abuse and teenage pregnancy through her nonprofit, A.C.T., Awakening Change Together.

"How many billions of bottles do people toss in the trash and don't realize they're energy? It seems like we know it. But again, people get into that mentality of, 'Oh it's just one can, I'm just one person.' That's the disease—not to think that your contribution is important," she says. "So it's all about empowering and helping people realizing that we have power collectively."

Anani becomes enthusiastic when she starts talking about her plans for the nonprofit. She wants to build better inroads in her community and others, and Anani has

a particular soft spot in her heart for teenagers. Having been a teenage mom and experimented with drugs and alcohol when she was in high school, Anani runs a yoga program at a local juvenile detention center and often

talks to kids about the importance of discovering their individual potential. Anani plans to take her lecture to juveniles at a detention center in Boulder.

"I say, 'Listen, I was 24 when I started boxing. By most standards, that's late. Oscar De La Hoya and Muhammad Ali, they started boxing when they were 8 years old. And they fought 100 or 200 fights as amateurs. I started at the age of 24,'" she says. "I'm not saying that to brag, I'm saying that it's never too late."

One particularly important teenager in Anani's life is her son, Mathew.

"He works out with me. He was a big sparring partner in my last fight—he's gotten really fast hands and feet. This girl I fought moved a lot with footwork. He was a really big help for me," she says.

Anani says that she'll let her son decide whether he wants to enter the boxing world. What's most important to her is that her son belongs to the high school drama club, an outlet Anani says she never had, and one she says is important.

"I just want him to be involved in something. I was so insecure growing up, and I think if I had done something in school—drama, sports—my high school experience would have been different."

Anani is positive about her future and looks forward to her chance in the national spotlight. In the meantime, she trains four hours every day. It's a frustrating situation, she says, but it's nothing she can't handle.

"Yoga's all about discipline. In order to be great and do anything successfully you have to be disciplined—this is discipline time," she says. "I sure wouldn't be training hard and sparring if I wasn't a fighter." ❧

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Sumya Anani's workshop takes place Thursday, Feb. 23, 6-8 p.m., Friday, Feb. 24, 6-9 p.m. and Saturday, Feb. 25, 10 a.m.-12 p.m. and 1-3 p.m. at the Front Range Boxing Academy. To learn more about the workshop go to www.sumya.com, or call 303-546-9747.