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Shawnee's 'Island Girl' ready for a world title

by Steven St. John
Journal Herald Staff

Sumya Anani wouldn't hurt a fly. On the surface, Anani seems to be typical 26-year-old woman who holds a disdain for violence and profound love and respect for all those around her.

She teaches yoga, performs massage therapy, loves to spend time with her seven-year-old boy and hopes to someday open a holistic healing center in order to assist people in curing whatever ails them.

But, once you scratch that surface, Anani is anything but typical.

Sumya Anani, also known as "The Island Girl", is one of the fastest rising stars in the world of professional boxing.

On December 13 in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., Anani staked her claim as perhaps the best pound-for-pound female fighter in the world with a shockingly brutal 10-round decision over "The Coal Miner's Daughter" Christy Martin.

Martin had carried the mantle as best female fighter in the world and garnered world-wide attention as she appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated, was a guest on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and became the first female fighter to sign a million-dollar fight contract.

Anani, fighting in Martin's home state of Florida on a card promoted by Martin's promoter, Don King, was a huge underdog entering the fight, but left the ring as the crowd

favorite.

The star-struck Anani even asked King for a lock of his famous hair to put in her scrap book.

"He just looked at me kinda funny and walked away," she said.

The Fighter

So, how did this girl from Shawnee, a 1990 graduate of Shawnee Mission North, transform herself into the Evander Holyfield of female boxing?

According to Anani, it's all happened faster than she could have imagined.

"After I graduated from North, I attended Johnson County Community College and I competed on the weightlifting team there," explained Anani. "I continued to lift weights after I stopped competing and eventually became involved in yoga. So, one day, I was lifting weights at Bally's and I was approached by a guy named Barry Becker about becoming a boxer and that's how this whole thing started."

Becker, Anani's trainer and manager also recalls the day when he first spotted Anani.

"I saw her lifting weights and I was really impressed," recalls Becker. "I went up to her and asked her if she wanted to do something with those muscles besides just look good and I told her that I trained female boxers. She was interested and the rest is history."

Becker, who was a Golden Gloves Champion in 1970, was training four girls at the time he found Anani and claims within weeks she could beat them all despite the fact that they had been boxing for several years.

"In fact, after only three weeks of training, Sumya made her pro debut against a girl from Springfield, Mo. with a record of 8-2 and Sumya beat her handily," said Becker. "Sumya is really a natural at boxing. She couldn't have accomplished so much, so fast if she wasn't."

Anani was born in Minnesota and moved to Shawnee at an early age where she attended Ray Marsh Elementary School.

Anani, who now lives in Kansas City, has fond memories of growing up in Shawnee.

lived in Jamaica on and off for about a year.

"My son and I loved it there," she said. "It was a different culture, but I really enjoyed all of my time there."

Originally, Anani was called "The Jamaican Sensation", but soon "The Island Girl" was to be her nickname for good.

"I'm not Jamaican, so I didn't want to confuse anybody," laughed Anani.

of girl she is."

"A lot of athletes just want to talk about themselves, but not Sumya," added Becker. "She would rather hear about you and what your life is like and what kind of person you are."

The Training

Despite her raw talent, Anani still spends countless hours of training in various gyms to ensure she'll be in peak condition every time she steps into the ring.



ABOVE: Former Shawnee resident and current world-class female boxer, "The Island Girl" Sumya Anani

The Woman

After spending any amount of time with Anani, it is hard to believe that she makes her living by beating the heck out of other women.

She is extremely polite, very articulate and holds a certain grace about her that lends a comfort to those in her midst.

Even if you've just met her, Anani makes you feel like you are a dear old friend and she somehow

Anani swims 60-70 laps two or three times per week, lifts weights five or six times per week, works on boxing (hitting bags, shadow boxing, sparring) five or six times per week and even runs 100 stories of stairs in her apartment building a couple of times per week.

Anani also spars with male boxers to give her an edge against her opponents because most of the

the guys I spar with," said Randie Carver, widely regarded as the best male boxer in the midwest. "She has a world title in her future."

If that wasn't enough, Anani still serves as a yoga instructor, teaches boxercise classes and performs her massage therapy regularly on several clients.

However, boxing is still the main course on Anani's plate.

Besides Becker, local boxing trainer Brian Spicer also works with Anani and she is promoted by Jim Fulton and Bud Keys of PowerPunch Promotions of Kansas City.

"Barry will be my trainer forever and ever, as long as I'm in boxing," said the loyal Anani. "He's always been there for me and he's done everything in the world to help me. I draw confidence from him."

The Disappointment

As high as Anani is riding after her upset win over Martin, there was a time when it looked like the fight might never take place.

The fight between Anani and Martin was originally scheduled to take place in November and was to be televised nationwide on Showtime, but Martin mysteriously backed out just hours before the fight.

The Martin incident, along with the cancellation of a proposed fight between Anani and undefeated world champion Lucia Rijker that was to take place on Oct. 30, caused major disappointment for Anani, but she kept her head up and remained positive.

"I feel like everything happens for a reason, so maybe it wouldn't have been beneficial for me to fight on those occasions," she said. "I just kept training and remained confident that if I did get my chance against one of those fighters, I'd make the most of it."

The Tragedy

Anani, 12-0 with seven knockouts in the junior welterweight division (140 pounds), is proud of all that she has accomplished in the ring, but one of those twelve wins came at a price that almost caused Anani to end her career almost before it got started.

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Anani, who now lives in Kansas City, has fond memories of growing up in Shawnee.

"I really love the city of Shawnee and the people who live there," Anani said. "My mom still lives in Shawnee and my son attends school in the Shawnee Mission School District."

As for her nickname, Anani earned the moniker when she



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Even if you've just met her, Anani makes you feel like you are a dear, old friend and she somehow eases you enough to allow you to forget that she could drop you like a sack of dirty laundry with one right hook to the head.

"She is absolutely one of the nicest people that you would ever want to meet," said Becker. "She loves to help people. I think that if she ever starts to make some real money in boxing, she'll probably give it all away to those who are less fortunate. That's just the kind

Anani swims 60-70 laps two or three times per week, lifts weights five or six times per week, works on boxing (hitting bags, shadow boxing, sparring) five or six times per week and even runs 100 stories of stairs in her apartment building a couple of times per week.

Anani also spars with male boxers to give her an edge against her opponents because most of the male boxers are faster and stronger than any female she might step in the ring with.

"She hits harder than anyone I've ever been in the ring with," said undefeated Mary Ortega, another world-ranked female fighter from Kansas City. "I can't imagine anyone beating her."

The male boxers Anani has sparred with also attest to her ring prowess.

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Two year ago, Anani was matched against a woman named Katie Dallam for a fight scheduled to take place in St. Joseph, Mo.

Anani was unaware, but Dallam, who outweighed Anani by 40 pounds and was an experienced student of karate, had been involved in a car accident just days before and was not in perfect health.

Anani slugged it out with Dallam for four grueling rounds before Dallam collapsed and fell into a coma.

Dallam has since recovered, but did suffer some long-term brain damage.

Dealing with the fact that she caused such injuries to another fighter almost influenced Anani to quit boxing, but she stayed in the sport, formed a relationship with Dallam and, now, uses the tragedy to motivate her in the ring.

Anani is the exception because a lot of fighters who cause permanent or fatal injuries to an opponent in the ring find it hard to ever participate in the sport again.

They lose the aggressiveness and necessary instincts that once made them successful fighters due to the fear they have of seriously injuring another fighter.

However, Anani has avoided that pitfall.

"Whenever I'm in the ring and I think about Katie, I become moti-

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Shawnee's 'Island Girl' takes boxing world by storm

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vated," said Anani. "I remember that she told me it was her dream to become a world champion, so I feel like whatever I accomplish in the ring, I'm doing it for her."

Anani also said that Dallam has made a lot of progress and continues to live a full and meaningful life

Besides using what happened to Dallam, Anani claims that she is

also motivated by fear when she is in the ring.

"I'm scared to death when I'm in the ring," she said. "The fear motivates me and helps me to keep my focus."

And concerning the bad press female boxing has received in response to incidents like the one involving Dallam combined with the initial skepticism surrounding the sport, Anani feels that female boxing has managed to turn the

corner.

"At first, I don't think our sport was taken seriously. It was looked at as more of a novelty," she said. "But now, when people see the type of athletes that participate in female boxing along with their tremendous level of skill, I think they realize that it is a legitimate sport. Boxing fans love female boxing and we're really starting to gain a significant amount of popularity around the world."

The Future

For now, Anani continues to train, waiting for her next opportunity to prove she's the best female boxer in the world.

There's talk of a rematch with Martin, but few people think that the beaten boxer will be willing to subject herself again to the fury of Anani's fists.

Rijker seems to be a logical opponent, but logic and boxing

sometimes mix like oil and water.

Of course, due to her recent ring successes and infectious enthusiasms in and out of the ring, Anani will get the chance to fight in boxing capitals of the world such as Las Vegas, Atlantic City and New York, but none of these details matter to "The Island Girl".

"I'll fight anyone, anywhere, anytime," said Anani. "I want to fight Rijker, but if that doesn't happen, then I'll fight whoever they

put in front of me. I'd like to fight some more here locally, but I have to go wherever the fights are."

But, when, not if, she wins the world title, Anani promises to bring it back to her hometown.

"When the ring announcer finally presents me as the world champion," added Anani. "My hometown will read as Shawnee."