



Catching up with boxer Sonya Lamonakis, Elton John tribute artist Greg Ransom

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Tom Shea

Update time to check in on old friends:

"Amtrak' is no tourist in world of boxing," (July 26, 2009)

We speak on the last day of school in New York City.

Sonya Lamonakis teaches humanities to seventh-graders in Harlem.

She explains that New York had a more severe winter than her hometown of Montague, which meant the school year needed to be extended to the last Monday of June.

Sonya is in Gleason's Gym, located under the Brooklyn Bridge, shadowboxing and jumping rope.

Four days earlier Sonya, 35, won her first professional heavyweight fight, with a technical knockout 2minutes and 20 seconds into the second round.

The bout was in Worcester. She was in her car by 11:30 p.m., home in New York by 3:30 a.m. And, in school in the morning.

The difference between amateur and pro, she notes: pros don't wear protective headgear and gloves are 10 ounces, not 12.

"My goal," Sonya says evenly, "is to be the heavyweight champion of the world."

She the winner of four consecutive New York Daily News Golden Glove titles, a record for a woman.

One year ago, Sonya captured the National Golden Gloves championship with a knockout in the 178-pound class, retiring as No. 1 in her 178-pound weight class and was recognized by Sports Illustrated in its weekly "Faces In The Crowd," which salutes the accomplishments of outstanding amateurs.

The New York Daily News wrote: "She is a significant figure in amateur boxing."

The former Stoneleigh-Burnham School field hockey center halfback, Turners Falls High left fielder and one-time Springfield College varsity softball second baseman took up boxing at age 27.

She was working out at Gold's Gym in Springfield. A man told the 5-foot, 8-inch, 222-pound Greek-American she'd make a good boxer.

"I didn't know anything about boxing," Sonya recalls, "but I had nothing competitive going in my life at the time. I grew up playing sports. I went down to the South End Community Center. This was 2003. I liked it immediately. The whole atmosphere. I was told about the Whitley brothers (Darrin and Derrick) and their gym in Holyoke. I learned there that boxing is more of a science. You have to be smart."

Sonya, who has an undergraduate degree from Springfield and a master's from American International College, worked as a speech therapist in Springfield, Longmeadow and Chicopee before moving to New York City five years ago.

In that first professional bout, she lived up to her nickname "Amtrak" (bestowed on her while working out Gleason's) with a surging, unrelenting powerful set of punches to her opponent Kasondra Hardnett's body.

Sonya's next fight is scheduled for July 28 at B.B. King's on 42nd Street in New York.

"They chant for Bennie and the Jets," (July 20, 1997)

Greg Ransom sounds like he's on a cell phone from Baghdad.

He's not.

He's on Interstate 391 heading to Theodore's in downtown Springfield to meet with friends he hasn't seen since last month in Baghdad.

Greg, 40, fronts what he believes to be the original Elton John tribute band, Bennie and the Jets.

He's Bennie.

Born 15 years ago, Bennie and the Jets have sung goodbye to yellow brick roads for so many weekends from coast to coast, shows authentic down to the space between Bennie's teeth.

For 10 days in May and early June, at the invitation of the U.S. Army, Bennie and the Jets – which includes

local musicians Dan Moraski, Steve Lawton and Mike Gibbs – entertained troops with Elton John’s greatest hits. The tour included a show at Camp Victory in Baghdad.

“It was,” Greg says, “this great honor. For two hours the men and women we played for didn’t have to think about the war.”

A poor connection interrupts our call.

“The favorite song?” Greg says, louder. “That had to be ‘Rocket Man.’ It really got a big reaction every night.”

He half sings, half speaks the words:

*“And, I think its gonna be a long, long time
“Till touchdown brings me home again to find
“I’m not the man they think I am at home.”*

Greg, a 1988 graduate of Springfield’s Central High School who served in the Air Force, is now a civilian medical technician at the Military Entrance Processing Station in Springfield.

He says temperatures in Iraq reach 125 degrees some days.

“Even at night, temperatures would hover around 100,” he says. “We visited some of Saddam’s palaces. It was crazy. I guess what surprised me the most was how quiet it was. I’m not sure what I was expecting. But I didn’t expect the quiet.”

A video of the trip can be found online at the band’s website, **www.bennieandthejets.com**.

The band plays closer to home on Aug. 19, at the Majestic Theater in West Springfield.

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