

Johnson, Mamie "Peanut" 1932-

Contemporary Black Biography
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Mamie "Peanut" Johnson 1932-

Baseball pitcher

Faced Challenge of Sexism

Grasped Depth of Segregation

Gained Nickname "Peanut"

Sources

Mamie "Peanut" Johnson played baseball with the Negro Leagues for three seasons in the 1950s as a member of the Indianapolis Clowns, becoming one of just three women ever to take the field with men at the top levels of organized baseball. She deserves to be ranked among those athletes who attempted to integrate the world of professional sports; she tried but failed to secure a tryout in the all-white All-American Girls League, which originated during World War II. After years of obscurity, Johnson's story was chronicled in a 2002 book for young people, *A Strong Right Arm*, a reconstruction of her life told in the first person rather than in a series of interviews.

Mamie Johnson was born on September 27, 1932. She never knew her father, who left the family before she was born. Johnson grew up in Ridgeway, South Carolina, where she was raised by her maternal grandmother, Cendonia Belton. Her mother, Della Belton, took a job in Washington, D.C., sent money and sometimes a nice dress or a winter coat back to the family, and visited whenever she could. Johnson's family home in South Carolina was an unusually pleasant one, with 18 rooms, streams nearby on the property, and an attached fruit orchard.

Faced Challenge of Sexism

Johnson played baseball with neighborhood boys in South Carolina on a diamond marked with a pie plate for first base, a broken piece of a flower pot for second, a tree root near a lilac

bush for third, and the lid of a five-gallon bucket of King Cane sugar for home plate. Her fellow player and first coach when she was young was her uncle, Leo "Bones" Belton, and it was he who taught Johnson to pitch. "I didn't pitch like a girl, either," she was quoted as saying in *A Strong Right Arm*. "Bones made sure of that. Not an underhanded fling of the ball. But a surefire, windup, coming-right-at-ya pitch smack dab over the plate."

After her grandmother's death, Johnson was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Long Branch, New Jersey. Before seeing her off on the bus, her uncle Bones showed her the technique for throwing a knuckleball pitch. She was disappointed to find that she was relegated to the girls' softball team at the town's segregated Liberty Elementary School. But one day she spotted a sandlot game that was being played under the auspices of the local Police Athletic League. She went to the precinct house the next day and talked the

At a Glance...

Born on September 27, 1932 in Ridgeway, SC; daughter of Della Belton; married Charles Johnson; children: Charlie. **Education:** Attended New York University; North Carolina A&T University, nursing degree.

Career: Played baseball on St. Cyprian's team in Washington recreational league, 1940s-1950s; Indianapolis Clowns, Negro Leagues, pitcher, 1953-55; registered nurse, 1950s-1990s; worked at Negro leagues Baseball Shop, Capitol Heights, MD, 1990s-.

Memberships: Founder, They Played Baseball Foundation, 1999-.

Address: Office —They Played Baseball Foundation, P.O. Box 1622, Mitchellville, MD 20717.

team's police officer-coach into letting her show him what she could do, and soon she was both the first girl and the first black player in the league's history. Her fellow players complained less after she helped the team win two league championships.

In high school in Long Branch, Johnson played football on the boys' team as well, but toward the end of her high school years she moved in with her mother in Washington, D.C. As a girl in South Carolina, Johnson had heard about the Negro Leagues from her uncle, and she had begun to follow the exploits of the local Washington Homestead Grays and other league teams. But what really ignited her dreams of playing baseball beyond the local level was the legendary Jackie Robinson's first major league baseball season with the Brooklyn Dodgers. His first hit, Johnson recalled in *A Strong Right Arm*, "soared into center field and took the hearts and hopes of all colored people with it."

After graduating from high school, Johnson took a job in an ice cream parlor and played on the St. Cyprian's squad in Washington's recreational baseball league. In 1952 Johnson and a

friend, Rita Jones, answered a Washington newspaper notice inviting players to attend local tryouts for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. That organization had its beginnings during World War II, and though it broke down barriers for women, its spirit of openness didn't extend to African-American women; the league remained all-white even as the male major leagues were entering the era of integration. Johnson and Jones were not even allowed on the field to try out, and Johnson took the rejection hard.

Grasped Depth of Segregation

Though she had rejoiced at Jackie Robinson's break-through and had certainly experienced the realities of pre-civil-rights-era segregation, these realities had never really sunk in. "Segregation, you know—I didn't know anything about it, because when I was small, when I left South Carolina, where I come from, it was all black," Johnson told National Public Radio (NPR) interviewer Scott Simon. "I went to New Jersey, and ... I was in an all-white school, and I never knew the difference, because I was treated like I was just another child."

Johnson returned to the St. Cyprian's team, and one day in early 1953, in the midst of a pitching appearance that saw her mow down some of the city's top male hitters, she was spotted by former Negro Leaguer Bish Tyson. Tyson told her of an upcoming Indianapolis Clowns tryout and encouraged her to attend. She did, and by the end of a long day that saw her try out her pitching skills on various Clowns hitters (including the team's first female player, Toni Stone), she had a contract in hand. She was paid \$200 a month.

Johnson's mother had always encouraged her daughter's baseball ambitions, but Johnson recalled to NPR's Bob Edwards that she had feared her mother's reaction when it came to actually leaving home and heading for the Clowns' spring training camp in Richmond, Virginia: "Honestly, I'm going to be frank with you, I slipped away," she said. "And I had a young son at that particular time, and when [my mother] found out I was playing baseball, you know, she took it in stride and I appreciate that so much."

With pitching help from the legendary Negro Leaguer "Satchel" Paige, Johnson notched an impressive record over three years in the League, with a record of 11 wins and three losses in 1953, ten wins and one loss in 1954, and 12 wins and four losses in 1955. Johnson, like other black players, lived a hard life, sleeping mostly on the team bus. "Getting into a bed maybe once every three weeks was beautiful," she told NPR's Edwards.

Gained Nickname "Peanut"

It wasn't until her professional baseball years that Johnson gained the nickname "Peanut," bestowed on her by Kansas City Monarchs' third baseman Hank Baylis. In the process of

striking out while Johnson was on the pitcher's mound, Baylis angrily remarked that she was no bigger than a peanut, and the name stuck. Johnson weighed in at 98 pounds during her playing years. Having taken the field with male players for most of her life, Johnson wasn't fazed by her nearly unique status as a female player, and for the most part her male counterparts treated her well. There were some exceptions, however. "You got your gentlemen, and then you've got your men," Johnson told Edwards.

The Negro Leagues went into decline in the late 1950s as they faced crushing competition from the newly integrated major leagues, and Johnson left the baseball world. She took classes in medicine and engineering at New York University and later graduated from North Carolina A&T University with a nursing degree. She married Washingtonian Charles Johnson, and the couple raised a son, Charlie. For much of her life she worked as a registered nurse, but after retiring from that career she took a job at the Negro Leagues Baseball Shop in Capitol Heights, Maryland. In 1999 she created the They Played Baseball Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to baseball instruction and to transmitting the history of the game, particularly of the Negro Leagues, to young people.

It was at the Negro Leagues Baseball Shop that Johnson offered to autograph a jersey for Maryland freelance writer Michelle Y. Green. The ensuing conversation between the two women blossomed into the book *A Strong Right Arm* and into a round of media appearances for Johnson. Overlooked for many years, Mamie "Peanut" Johnson was now in demand for interviews and for the ceremonial opening toss of the ball at minor league games. Hers has been an unusual story of pure dedication to the game of baseball, belatedly recognized.

Sources

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Johnson, for the National Public Radio program, *All Things Considered*, on August 31, 2002 and the National Public Radio program, *Morning Edition*, on February 18, 2003.

—James M. Manheim

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