

Toni Stone

(1921-1996)

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Sources:

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- Thomas, Jr. Robert Mcg. "Toni Stone, 75, First Woman to Play Big-League Baseball." *New York Times*. November 10, 1996.
- "Clowns, Memphis in Twin Bill Sunday." *Indianapolis Recorder*. August 22, 1953.

In 1953, Toni Stone became the first woman to play professional men's baseball when she joined the Negro League's Indianapolis Clowns. Born Marcenia Lyle Stone in 1921, "Toni" grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dubbed "Tomboy," Stone lived for baseball, but her parents felt her interest was unfeminine. They relented when their priest suggested that Stone play for the Catholic boys' team under his guidance. Stone's talent and persistence paid off when she was invited to tour with a black men's barnstorming team.

From her teens through her twenties, Stone played on several men's local, barnstorming, Legion, and semi-pro baseball teams. She wanted to play for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in the late forties, but was denied the opportunity as the league was segregated. In 1950, she married Aurelius Alberga, a man forty years her senior. Although previously supportive of her baseball career, upon his request, Toni sat out for the 1951 season. This furthered her drive to play professional baseball.

Her big break came in 1952. Syd Pollack, owner of the Negro League's Indianapolis Clowns, needed a scrappy, solid player that could also draw big at the gate. Pollack offered Stone the chance to play second base for the Clowns for the 1953 season. Stone endured a grueling schedule as well as pervasive sexism and racism but she never backed down, telling reporters, "Don't worry. I can take care of myself." Her talents, as well as the novelty of seeing a professional woman baseball player, drew in crowds for the Clowns and attracted extensive press coverage, both positive and negative. Stone joined the Kansas City Monarchs for the 1954 season, but the Negro League was struggling after the integration of Major League Baseball. Now in her thirties, Stone began questioning her career and love of the game. She walked away after the 1954 season.

Stone was lost without baseball but slowly found her way back. In the 1960s, she coached a local boys' team and played men's recreational baseball. However, it wasn't until decades later that Stone received the recognition she deserved for playing professional baseball.



Toni Stone meeting boxer, Joe Louis. Photo Courtesy: Minnesota Historical Society