



# The Clerk's Black History Series

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# Jackie Tonawanda

(September 4, 1933 – June 9, 2009)

## “Women’s Boxing Pioneer”



**Jackie Tonawanda** was born Jean Jamison in Suffolk County, New York on Sept. 4, 1933. She was orphaned at the age of eight and spent most of her youth in the streets of Brooklyn. By the age of 13, Jackie had become a regular at Gleason’s Boxing gym where she learned to box by training with male opponents. Jackie’s larger frame and weight gave her the ability to spar with grown men, giving them a challenge that they never expected from a woman.

As she grew, her weight of 175lbs, established her as a heavyweight fighter. Unfortunately, there weren’t many, if any, other women in her same weight class, which forced Jackie to continue sparring with men. Women were not sanctioned to fight in real prize fights, so most of Jackie’s bouts occurred underground and with men. Her official record is often scrutinized by this fact, but she claimed a 36-0 record, with a knockout of one of her male opponents.



Since women were not legally allowed to box in official bouts, it also meant that they couldn’t win prize money or receive recognition for their boxing skill. Frustrated with the limitations placed on women boxing, Jackie, began her application for a boxing license in 1974. At that time, women could legally be pro-wrestlers and boxing managers in New York, so when her application was denied, she was disappointed.

Jackie had some support in the boxing community, but many thought that women shouldn’t be in the boxing ring. Ed Dooley, the head of the Athletic commission, was an outspoken opponent of Jackie. Ed believed that women boxing would bring down the view of the sport. False information began to spread that body punches to a woman’s chest could cause breast cancer. Undeterred, Jackie faced the sexism head on and set out to prove that women were more than capable athletes for the sport. She sued the state of New York for discrimination and the state supreme court ruled in her favor, urging her to sue once again to have the laws preventing women from boxing to be revoked.

On June 8, 1975, Jackie made history in the Aaron Bank’s Oriental World of Self Defense show (not an official bout) held in Madison Square Garden, when she knocked out male mixed martial arts fighter, Larry Rodania, in the second round with a left hook to the jaw. She was the first female boxer to fight in Madison Square Gardens.



Her notoriety caught the attention of many, but none more notably than the “Greatest of All Time”, Muhammad Ali. In 1976 Jackie was invited to attend a training camp by Muhammad Ali; Jackie was awestruck and so nervous she couldn’t eat. Jackie later coined herself the “Female Ali”.

The movement Jackie started to recognize women’s boxing as legitimate was taken further by fellow boxer Cathy Davis in 1978 which led to Davis, Jackie, and Marian Trimiar to be the first women to receive official boxing licenses in the state of

New York. On February 16, 1979, Jackie lost her first and only professional bout against a last minute replacement fighter, Diane Clark, who won by split decision after six, hard-fought rounds.



When Jackie was not in the ring, she gave motivational talks to young people, and lent her voice to state campaigns like Athletes Against Drunk Driving of New York. She was also well known for her assistance with Lloyd Williams at Harlem’s Uptown Chamber of Commerce.

On June 8, 2001, Jackie made a rare televised appearance at the Turning Stone Casino for the Laila Ali vs. Jacqui Frazier bout; Jackie spoke with one of the commentators of the pay-per-view event.

Soon after, Jackie faded from the spotlight and went into seclusion, fighting an unknown illness.

On June 9, 2009, Jackie Tonawanda lost one last battle when she died of colon cancer at Harlem’s Mount Sinai Hospital. Like many boxers from her time, she had no pension to fund her funeral. However, Ring 8, a New York boxing association, raised funds for her to have a marked grave in the Bronx, memorializing her story and cementing her place within boxing history. Jackie Tonawanda was posthumously inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2021.

