

EIP

Lonnie Johnson, Black History Month 2023

This is the second article in our series as we celebrate Black History Month. One individual who has left a mark on the world is Lonnie Johnson, the mind behind the iconic Super Soaker. In this article, we will look at his journey to creating the Super Soaker and how he secured his first patent for this game-changing device.

Lonnie George Johnson was born on 6 October 1949, in Mobile, Alabama. He was a high achiever academically, earning his Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from Tuskegee University and later obtaining a Master's degree in Nuclear Engineering from the Tuskegee Institute. Johnson's exceptional talent was evident in his work, including his involvement as a systems engineer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

While working on an unrelated project in the late 1980s, Lonnie Johnson stumbled upon the idea that would eventually become the Super Soaker. He was experimenting with a heat pump system that used water as a working fluid when he noticed that a high-pressure stream of water shot from a nozzle had the potential for creating a unique water gun. Inspired by this observation, Johnson began to refine his idea, envisioning a water gun that could shoot powerful streams of water.

Johnson obtained a first patent granted for his toy, US 4,591,071, in 1986. The Super Soaker later made its debut on the market in 1990, initially under the brand name "Power Drencher." Within two years, the toy generated more than \$200 million in sales. It wasn't until Johnson partnered with the toy company Larami that the water gun was rebranded as the "Super Soaker".

In 1995, Larami became a subsidiary of Hasbro who, a year later, agreed to pay Johnson royalties of 2 percent for "three-dimensional products" based on the appearance of the toy and 1 percent for any "two-dimensional visual representations". Although the

contract was breached as Johnson was not paid adequately for a long time, he was eventually awarded \$72.9 million in unpaid royalties against Hasbro in 2013.

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Lonnie Johnson's inventive spirit has inspired countless individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, to pursue careers in science and engineering. His success as an inventor and engineer serves as a powerful example of excellence, breaking down barriers for future generations to pursue their dreams and make significant contributions to the world.