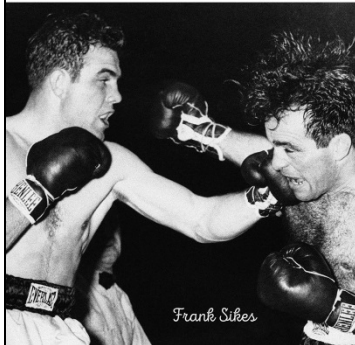


WEST TEXAS MIDDLEWEIGHT

The Story of LaVern Roach

"Boxing changed because of LaVern Roach."—Angelo Dundee



Frank Sikes, *West Texas Middleweight: The Story of LaVern Roach*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2016. xxii, 272 pp. Hardback \$24.95.

On February 22, 1950, middleweight contender LaVern Roach of Plainview, Texas, squared off against Georgie Small in New York's St. Nicholas Arena. It was Roach's 25th birthday. Just before noon the following day, he died of wounds sustained in the ring. Frank Sikes's *West Texas Middleweight: The Story of LaVern Roach* both opens and closes with this bout. Intervening chapters explore Roach, the man and the boxer, while two concluding chapters contextualize the impact of Roach's unexpected death on professional boxing.

The book is a chapter-by-chapter, chronological biography. Thus, its first third is dedicated to Roach's youth in Plainview. Detailed descriptions of the town and surrounding South Plains and Panhandle regions evolve into a larger theme of hometowns and their heroes that runs throughout the book. These early chapters contain a number of digressions into the particulars of Plainview High School life and granular descriptions of local sports, gleaned entirely from local newspapers and secondary sources. More germane are anecdotes from Roach's contemporaries used to establish the boxer's all-American, Golden Boy image--another consistent theme. The Great Depression's impact on the region and survivors led to Roach's tough-minded, disciplined work ethic. This fueled his training as a boxer, and he rose rapidly through the West Texas ranks until the onset of World War II. At that time, Roach joined the U.S. Marine Corps.

Roach's military career is where *West Texas Middleweight* begins to shine, primarily as a vehicle to establish his pugilistic potential. Both during and after his service, Roach won one hundred amateur bouts, as well as the Golden Gloves welterweight championship. Here Sikes again portrays Roach as universally-liked; an ideal recruit lionized by his squadmates, commanders, sparring partners, and trainers. The emphasis on Roach's unimpeachable character at times reads as much a eulogy as a history. One wonders how that squares with the extraordinarily violent careers Roach allegedly felt passionate about: the Marine Corps and professional boxing. Future sports scholars might delve more deeply into the "other side" of Roach, and perhaps all fighters, that such choices suggest.

Later chapters typically center around specific fights, using them as devices to contextualize Roach's life and career. Tony Janiro's defeat at Roach's hands and Marcel Cerdan's thorough victory over the West Texan are two of the best. In these, correspondence between Roach and his family, managers, the Plainview press, and other acquaintances prove an invaluable primary source. Roach was a prolific correspondent, producing a day-to-day, ringside view of his life provided by few biographies of similarly lesser-known athletes. Several successive defeats sent Roach into retirement, but only for a short while. Money and the ambition to become the world middleweight champion drove him back to New York and, ultimately, his death.

West Texas Middleweight is not situated in the historiography of professional sports, yet Sikes engages the historical conversation by arguing that Roach's death had implications far beyond

the Texas Panhandle, or even New York's venues. Investigation into the tragedy by the New York State Athletic Commission and, shortly thereafter, the District Attorney's office, combined with tremendous media and political attention to pressure boxing into examining its consequences. Official reports declared that no rules, regulations, or crimes had been committed in the Roach-Small fight, yet boxing instituted more rigorous safety regulations--some merely lip service, but some of lasting effect. Explaining this broader context should therefore appeal to both scholars examining boxing's evolution in the twentieth century as well as readers interested in early professional boxing and its forgotten contenders.

Robert Weaver
Texas Tech University