

NEW YORK — Paulie Malignaggi knew going in, as did the rest of us, that he would be fighting two opponents at the Hammerstein Ballroom Saturday night, and his formidable skills notwithstanding, Edner Cherry would be the less dangerous of them.

The other was the Shade of Miguel Cotto, or at the very least, the residual memory of what Malignaggi had looked like the last time he walked out of a boxing ring. Cut, battered, bruised, and beaten, to be whisked out of Madison Square Garden and straight to the hospital.

And trust us, as bad as he looked that night, he felt even worse.

Following surgery to repair the broken facial bones incurred in the Cotto fight, the Brooklyn junior welterweight had been cleared to resume training late last summer, but seven months would elapse before he would throw a punch in anger.

Paulie passed both tests with flying colors, if one dares mention ‘color’ on in connection with a night in which Malignaggi dyed his hair blue to match his blue-and-silver trunks.

Malignaggi showed that his trademark quickness and elusiveness hadn’t suffered from the long layoff as he earned a runaway unanimous decision over Cherry, a battle-tested Bahamas native who had come to New York sporting a 21-4-2 career mark.

And if he was at all gun-shy from his last unhappy experience, we never noticed it, and trust us, Edner Cherry didn’t either.

“It’s rare that you see a performance like this after a guy has had his face broken in his last fight,” said an admiring promoter Lou DiBella after Malignaggi’s resurrection in the main event of DiBella’s Boxing After Dark ‘Triple Play’ card at the sold-out Hammerstein.

Cherry said later that he had come into the bout hoping to match Malignaggi’s speed and cut the ring off on the 26-year-old Brooklynite, but it didn’t take long for him to figure out that wasn’t going to happen.

Malignaggi was almost routinely able to land quick combinations and dance out of harm’s way, and by the end of the evening he had landed his jab nearly twice as often – 103-56 – as Cherry.

Over the final three minutes, Cherry, sensing that he was hopelessly behind, threw caution to the wind and waged an all-out attack of aggression to stage his best round.

“I think,” said Malignaggi, “that was desperation.”

Malignaggi certainly didn’t overexpose himself to danger against Cherry, but that appeared to be more a matter of prudence than the lingering hangover from the Cotto fight.

Malignaggi/Powell/Berto Headline B.A.D.

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"I really made a conscious effort not to go toe-to-toe," said Malignaggi. "I did that against Miguel Cotto, and it's just not my fight. This was my first fight training with Buddy McGirt. He's on the way to making me a complete boxer, but it's not going to happen in one fight."

"Paulie fought a good fight, and he was in his hometown," said Cherry of the lopsided decision, which saw The Magic Man score a 100-90 shutout on judge Steve Epstein's scorecard and prevail 98-92 on those of Billy Costello and Tom Kaczmarek, as well as that of The Sweet Science.

Malignaggi, now 22-1, said he'd like to fight Cotto again somewhere down the line ("even if I have to move up to welterweight to do it"), but didn't sound in any hurry to do it.

The name of Ricky Hatton also came up as a possible future opponent, but, said Malignaggi, "I wouldn't say this performance tonight makes me ready for Ricky Hatton, but I'm on the way back."

Malignaggi-Cherry wasn't exactly a barnburner, but alongside the Sechew Powell-Ishe Smith co-feature it looked like a Fight of the Year.

Powell, who had his own demons to exorcise after his August loss to Kassim Ouma at the Garden, was awarded a unanimous decision, despite having to climb off the floor following a fourth-round knockdown.

"It was a flash knockdown. He didn't hurt me," said Powell of the episode, which came when both boxers threw right hands. Powell landed his jab, but wasn't in position to withstand the overhand right Smith caught him with in return.

In fairness to Powell, Smith's is a difficult style for any opponent, particularly a southpaw. The Las Vegas 'Contender' alumnus positions himself at an awkward angle, nearly perpendicular to his target, and stands with his right glove seemingly glued to his nose.

While it is essentially a defensive posture, Powell eventually learned that he could get there with his jab, but not much else, and for much of the evening Smith was able to counterpunch effectively.

It was a fight that wasn't going to do much for the winner whichever boxer prevailed. Our scorecard actually had Smith in front at the end (as did that of HBO's Harold Lederman), but the three judges whose cards counted, Dick Flaherty, Allen Rubenstein, and Bob Gilson, all had Powell winning 97-92, meaning that each gave Smith just one round other than the knockdown fourth.

"He had a difficult style all right," said Powell, now 21-1. "It took me all night to figure him out. He was just waiting to counterpunch, and it made it difficult."

Smith's undoing, if it was that, was a failure to throw more punches than he did. Although he was out-jabbed 102-37, he actually landed more power shots than Powell (110-103), and

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considering that his were considerably more forceful, he might have done some real damage had he offered to engage more often than he did.

Although the crowd loudly booed the decision, Smith himself didn't sound much like a guy who shared their displeasure with the judges' verdict.

"I didn't fight my fight tonight," said Ishe, now 18-1. (His only previous defeat had been a split decision to Sergio Mora in on of those Contender 5-rounders.) "I just never found my rhythm."

It was, on balance, not a great night for Contender graduates. In the opening bout of the BAD telecast, undefeated welterweight Andre Berto turned in the most impressive performance of the evening, decking another reality show performer, Norberto Bravo, three times on the way to a first-round TKO. Berto (16-0), who represented Haiti in the 2004 Athens Games after being disqualified during the US Olympic Trials, wasted little time, and was pasting Bravo with solid jabs right from the opening bell.

A minute into the fight he dropped in a hook off the jab, a punch that caught Bravo on the side of the head and sent him down. Bravo bounced up at four, but Berto waded in and landed all five punches of a five-punch combo that began with a right-hand lead and ended with another left that put the Arizonan on the floor again. Joe Cusano allowed action to continue, but Berto landed three more left hooks to deck his foe again, and this time the referee stopped it (at 2:28) before Bravo even hit the canvas.

"I didn't think it was going to be this easy," confessed Berto. "I came in slowly, trying go gauge his speed, and I threw the jab just to give it a new look. But then I started throwing punches. I felt strong and tough tonight. It was a good show for the fans in New York."

"He's a big, strong dude," said Bravo after his decidedly un-bravo performance. "He didn't really hurt me, but I kept falling off-balance."

Bravo (23-13-3) was a substitute for originally scheduled foe Ben Tackie, who might have put up more of a fight. CompuBox stats showed Berto landing 28 punches to just three for Bravo in the abbreviated contest.

Pawel Wolak, the rugged Polish-born junior middleweight prospect now domiciled in New Jersey, won his 14th pro bout in as many tries when his Dominican opponent Luis Hodge (5-3) retired on his stool after the fourth. Although there were no knockdowns, Wolak was battering the game Hodge throughout the fourth, and referee Eddie Claudio appeared to be on the verge of stopping it at least a couple of times.

Brentwood (Long Island) middleweight James McGirt Jr., the son of trainer Buddy McGirt, improved to 14-0 with a fourth-round TKO of Ohioan Anthony Little (7-6). Officially there were no knockdowns, though Little went down in the third from what referee Pete Santiago ruled a slip (actually it was a right to the back of the neck). McGirt, trained by his father (as are Malignaggi and Powell) was cut near the right eye in the fourth, badly enough that he felt compelled to pick up the pace. Late in the round, McGirt had trapped Little against the ropes

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and was pounding away with impunity when Pete Santiago stopped it at 2:46.

A distaff bout in which both participants had historical connections around the corner at Madison Square Garden saw former Knick City Dancer Eileen Olszewski upset Canadian Noriko Kariya, the kid sister (but best fighter) of the noted NHL hockey-playing family.

Olszewski, Hawaiian-raised but now living in New York, was light on experience, but carried the day on the cards of Rubenstein (60-54) and Gilson (58-56), while Kariya led on Flaherty's scorecard, 58-56. Olzewski is now 2-0, Kariya 6-2-1.

The opening bout of the evening saw Dominican featherweight Argenis Mendez (2-0) outpoint Colorado visitor Ruben Jacoby (0-3). Kaczmarek scored it a shutout at 40-36, while Costello and Epstein (39-37) each gave Jacoby a round.

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JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHTS: Paulie Malignaggi, 139½, Brooklyn dec. Edner Cherry, 137¼, Nassau, Bahamas (10)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS: James McGirt Jr., 161¼, Brentwood, NY TKO'd Anthony Little, 158¾, Akron, Ohio (4)

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Sechew Powell, 153½, Brooklyn, NY dec. Ishe Smith, 154¼, Las Vegas (10)

Pawel Wolak, 154, Debica, Poland TKO'd Luis Hodge, 153¾, Santo Domingo, D.R. (4)

WELTERWEIGHTS: Andre Berto, 145½, Winter Haven, Fla. TKO'd Norberto Bravo, 146½, Tucson, Ariz. (1)

FEATHERWEIGHTS: Argenis Mendez, 126, San Juan de la Maguana, D.R. dec. Ruben Jacoby, 126, Colorado Springs, Colo. (4)

BANTAMWEIGHTS: Eileen Olszewski, 114¾, Honolulu, Hawaii dec. Noriko Kariya, 116¾, Vancouver, Canada (6)