CARDIFF, Wales – Few would have expected the clash between big-hitting cruiserweights Enzo Maccarinelli and Wayne Braithwaite to last the twelve round distance. But a display of admirable resolve helped Braithwaite hear the final bell, despite absorbing thunderous shots throughout the one-sided bout.

The 6'4" Maccarinelli may not be the most fleet-footed or polished practitioner of the sweet science, but he showed improved boxing skills in controlling the contest with thudding jabs and lefts hooks.

Braithwaite looked relaxed and confident entering the ring at the Cardiff International Arena, but he endured an uncomfortable night, offering little in the way of offence while being preoccupied with Maccarinelli's well-timed combinations.

The Welshman retained his WBO title with the judge's scores of 119-108, 118-109 and 120-107 reflecting his dominance.

The impressive win means the 26-year-old can now look forward to a unification bout with IBF beltholder Steve Cunningham, probably in November on the undercard of the Joe Calzaghe-Mikkel Kessler superfight.

From the first bell Maccarinelli, 27-1 (20), took control of the centre of the ring, imposing his four inch height advantage over the former WBC champ with a series of hurtful looking jabs. Braithwaite, 31, continually switched stance from orthodox to southpaw in an attempt to confuse Maccarinelli, but the Welshman's fast start left him looking bemused.

The second and third rounds followed a similar pattern, as Maccarinelli enjoyed success with sharp lefts to the head and body, while the challenger was forced onto the back foot. Braithwaite made numerous gestures to show he wasn't hurt from the heavy blows, but Maccarinelli nonetheless remained on the offensive.

Braithwaite, 22-3 (18), fought with more urgency in the fourth after his corner told him to "throw more bombs" against his taller opponent. A looping right hand forced Maccarinelli onto the ropes, but he answered Braithwaite's attack with heavy one-twos.

The fifth round began at a slower tempo, with Braithwaite effectively avoiding Maccarinelli's jab, while landing a sneaky right that temporarily halted the champ's aggression. But just as Braithwaite launched another attack, Maccarinelli countered with a left that landed flush on the chin, sending the Guyana native to the canvas. Braithwaite seemed dazed, but he beat the count just before the round ended.

Maccarinelli put more emphasis on landing solid left hooks to Braithwaite's ribcage from the sixth round onwards, visibly hurting his opponent who gamely absorbed the punishing blows.

Before the seventh Braithwaithe's trainer Dillon Crew told him he needed a knockout to win, while in the opposite corner Enzo Calzaghe told his charge to start using the uppercut. Maccarinelli followed up on the advice, landing a damaging-looking right uppercut that sent Braithwaite's mouthpiece flying into the crowd just before the bell sounded for round's end.

Maccarinelli dominated the eight and ninth frames, utilizing his jab to set up more hooks to the body which drew signs of distress from Braithwaithe, who complained to referee Mickey Vann that the shots were illegal. But his complaints were swiftly rejected and Maccarinelli continued to assault Braithwaite's ribs.

The challenger fought with more aggression in the tenth, gallantly exchanging with Maccarinelli, but blood began to flow visibly from Braithwaite's mouth as he seemed to tire towards the round's end.

Maccarinelli controlled the eleventh with more sharp lefts to the head and body, but Braithwaite enjoyed his best round in twelfth, landing a couple of solid left hooks that registered with the Welshman. Still, it wasn't enough to affect the result with Maccarinelli winning a justifiably wide decision.

"Braithwaite was a tough man, he took some great shots," said the victor. "I neglected my right hand, I hurt it earlier in the fight, but my jab kept him at bay. There's questions about my chin and stamina, but I showed I can take a shot on the chin, I showed I can box, I showed I have good stamina. Overall it was a good performance."

Few could argue with Maccarinelli's assessment having shown a new set of skills against undoubtedly his most dangerous opponent.

"Maccarinelli is vastly improved," said former featherweight champion Barry McGuigan. "We always knew he could bang but tonight he was jabbing from the offset, boxing beautifully. Braithwaite took so much punishment and showed tremendous courage and bravery.

"Maccarinelli should know be looking for the winner of the fight between [The Ring,WBC and WBA titlist] Jean-Marc Mormeck and David Haye. That would be a real humdinger."

With the Mormeck-Haye bout scheduled for September and Cunningham-Maccarinelli likely to happen two months later, a showdown between the winners would result in an undisputed champion being crowned early next year.

And after Saturday's performance, the odds on Maccarinelli being that man just got shorter.

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In other action, local fighter Gavin Rees, 27-0 (13), recorded an upset unanimous decision win over Souleymane M'Baye, 35-2-1 (21), to claim the Frenchman's WBA super-lightweight title.

Scottish prospect Alex Arthur, 25-1 (19), stopped Koba Gogoladze, 20-2 (8), at 2:48 of the tenth round.