The significance of the super middleweight division has been called into question throughout its two decade history, but it now lays claim to one of the sport's most decorated champions.

In front of 50,014 fans at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium on Saturday evening, Joe Calzaghe produced a fiery display of boxing to outpoint the previously undefeated Mikkel Kessler and finally earn recognition as one of the best pound-for-pound fighters on the planet.

All three judges voted in favour of Calzaghe, with Raul Caiz rendering a 117-111 verdict, while John Stewart and Massimo Barrovecchio scored it 116-112.

Despite making 20 defenses of his WBO title, critics continually dismissed the quality of Calzaghe's opposition, but on Saturday the Welshman overcame an exceptional opponent who entered the ring with an impressive 39-0 (29) record.

"Mikkel is one of the toughest fighters I've ever fought," said Calzaghe after the fight. "He is an excellent fighter and he's going to come back when I'm gone, but tonight was my night."

"This is the best night I've ever had in boxing," claimed Calzaghe's promoter Frank Warren. "Joe is the best fighter I've ever been involved with. He makes fights that he could win easily hard because of his fighting heart."

Having thoroughly dominated the best fighters in the 168-pound division, Calzaghe now wants to fight only the sport's most recognized names.

"Dig up the old guys like [light heavyweights] Roy Jones and [Bernard] Hopkins," declared Calzaghe. "I'm looking at fighting for another twelve months and I want to fight the big fights. When I add the seven pounds on, there'll be proper destruction."

"We want Hopkins and the TV companies should make it happen," demanded Warren at the post-fight press conference, while pointing at HBO's head of sports programming, Kery Davis. "Whatever way Hopkins wants it he can have it. He can pick the weight, the date and the town."

But in the immediate term Calzaghe said that he just wants to relax and let his body rest after Saturday's frenetic twelve rounds of action.

The bout was fought at a swift pace throughout, with Calzaghe forced to adapt to the sharp accuracy of the powerful Dane. Calzaghe, 44-0 (32), was unable to consistently unleash the speedy flurries that have highlighted his title reign as Kessler utilized a stinging jab and fierce right uppercut that disrupted the champion's rhythm. But the adoption of more conventional tactics eventually led to Calzaghe out-landing Kessler with increasing frequency as the bout progressed.

"I felt I could have won the fight a lot more comfortably than I did," maintained Calzaghe. "When I was sticking to boxing and using my jab, I felt my jab was doing great things. He caught me with some good punches and stung me a few times. I could have run but I stood toe-to-toe. I wanted to give the crowd their money's worth."

"Joe is a great fighter," stated Kessler. "When I tried to punch in combination and get away, he would not let me throw all the punches [that I wanted to]. Tonight was his night."

The spacious sports venue may have been rather chilly as the fighters made their way to the ring, but the contest took little time to warm up as Kessler quickly established his sharp jab, repeatedly tagging Calzaghe on the forehead. Yet the Welshman answered back with his southpaw lead left hand to force Kessler onto the defensive.

Kessler's jab continued to find the mark in the second, stymieing Calzaghe's attempted salvos. In a possible sign of frustration, Calzaghe dropped his hands and goaded Kessler to attack. The Dane, 168 pounds, accepted the offer and tagged Calzaghe with a hard right hand, but Joe responded with a trademark flurry at the round's end.

The third round saw Calzaghe display the form that brought him the stunning victory against Jeff Lacy. After launching an attack that saw Kessler lose balance and tumble to the canvas, Calzaghe unleashed a series of raid-fire combinations that had Mikkel reeling on the ropes. The Welshman then began taunting his taller foe, but Kessler responded with a stiff jab-right hand combination that earned Calzaghe's respect.

Kessler's most potent weapon, the right uppercut, became a factor in the contest during the fourth round when the punch landed flush on Calzaghe's chin. The blow saw Calzaghe on the back foot and a second accurate uppercut late in the frame silenced the formerly boisterous crowd.

The Copenhagen native enjoyed more success with the right hand in the fifth, sending sweat spraying from the 35-year-old champion on numerous occasions as Calzaghe seemed bemused at Kessler's composed assaults. Nonetheless, he absorbed Kessler's precise blows and managed to get his own jab working in the latter half of the round, landing it with increased frequency.

"I studied Joe and a number of his fights," revealed Kessler. "I hit him with some cleans shots in the fourth and fifth rounds, but he has a great chin."

Calzaghe, who had been standing in his corner between rounds, decided to sit on his stool after the fifth as his agitated father/trainer Enzo shouted, "Are you all right? Wake up! Wake up!"

A more conservative approach from Calzaghe saw him enjoy success with his jab and straight left cross in the following round. Even though Kessler did not appear to be visibly hurt, he later revealed that a Calzaghe body shot caused him some trouble.

"I had a problem in the sixth due to a body shot," admitted the 28-year-old. "That made the last six rounds very hard."

The swift tempo of the bout continued in the seventh with Calzaghe, 166 1⁄2 pounds, managing to avoid Kessler's venomous uppercuts. The eight round saw momentum switch between the fighters as Kessler unloaded with heavy three-punch combinations in the early stages before a sharp left hand from Calzaghe sent Kessler onto the retreat.

The ninth and tenth rounds saw a continuation of the battle between Calzaghe's frequent straight lefts and Kessler's thudding right hands, with the Welshman's superior volume the deciding factor in the scoring.

"Maybe I should have punched more," reflected Kessler. "I should have used more combinations instead of trying to punch hard."

Kessler rallied in the eleventh, shutting down Calzaghe's attacks with a stiff jab, but Joe still managed to maintain a frenetic work rate.

The champion showed signs of fatigue in the final frame, with a solid right uppercut from Kessler punctuating the round. Calzaghe attempted to raise his hands in a victory salute in the closing twenty seconds but Kessler launched a last-ditch attack in an unsuccessful attempt to grab the victory.

"Obviously, he was very strong and I got a bit tired at the end," acknowledged Calzaghe. "But I threw over a thousand punches.
When I get hurt I come back even stronger. That's why I've been champion for so long."

In the main undercard attraction, highly-touted cruiserweight Enzo Maccarinelli successfully defended his WBO title, stopping Mohamed Azzaoui in the fourth round.

Maccarinelli took control of the fight from the start, utilizing his long jab to put Azzaoui on the defensive. The New Zealand-based challenger offered little offence, hiding behind a high guard while circling away from Maccarinelli's vaunted right cross.

The Welshman, 29-1 (21), was content to keep Azzaoui at bay with the jab, while constantly threatening with the left hook.

The pattern continued until the fourth when Maccarinelli, perhaps buoyed by Azzaoui's lack of aggression, began putting more weight into his right hand. Azzaoui, 22-1-2 (8), managed to evade Maccarinelli's initial attacks, but he was unable to block a heavy left hook that landed just under his elbow.

Azzaoui crumpled to the canvas clutching his side and was counted out by Dave Parris at 58 seconds of the round.

Other undercard bouts:

Light heavyweight: Harry Miles W4 Mark Phillips

Super middleweight: Nathan Cleverley W8 Joey Vegas

Light heavyweight: Tony Bellew KO3 Adam Wilcox

Super featherweight: Ricky Burns W6 Yousef Al Hamidi

Middleweight:  Kerry Hope W4 Ernie Smith

Middleweight:  Thomas Povslen W6 Lee Noble

Light heavyweight: Anders Hugger W6 Hastings Rasani

Light welterweight: Barrie Jones W8 Silence Saheed

Light welterweight: Jamie Cox W4 David Kirk