LAS VEGAS-Realizing it could be his only chance for a coveted world title match, Mexico's Jesus Soto-Karass stepped it up in the middle rounds and landed a crunching combination for a technical knockout win over Chicago's David Estrada and took the NABF welterweight title on Friday.

"This was an important fight for me because it was against a world class fighter," said Soto-Karass (21-3-3, 15 KOs).

Soto-Karass had looked rather sluggish in his last fight, but against Chicago's Estrada (22-5, 13 KOs) the Mexican fighter from Los Mochis proved he was ready before a sold out crowd at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.

Both fighters entered with reputations for their non-nonsense approach and willingness to exchange big blows. This fight proved to be no different.

Soto-Karass's busy style forced Estrada to expend a lot of energy in their toe-to-toe war, but for seven rounds neither fighter could gain a serious edge.

"My corner kept telling me to step it up, but I thought I was doing well," said Soto-Karass. "I thought I was comfortably ahead."

In the seventh round Estrada let go with more combinations and it seemed to sap all the energy he had left. But he pulled closer in the scorecards by landing several serious left hooks.

Entering the eighth round Soto-Karass still looked fresher and though Estrada was willing, he lost that half a second quickness from the previous rounds and that proved disastrous. A left hook counter followed by four more punches dropped the Chicago fighter at 1:03 of the round for a technical knockout.

"It was a tough fight," said Soto-Karass. "He was a very difficult opponent."

The judges had Soto-Karass ahead 67-66 twice and 69-63.

**Other bouts**

Big Bear's Leo Santa Cruz (6-0-1, 2 KOs) and Laredo's Gino Escamilla (5-3-1) fought a tight six round junior bantamweight fight, but the taller Californian had the edge. No knockdowns occurred but the judges were unanimous in favor of Santa Cruz, 60-54, 58-56, 59-55.

Oxnard's Brandon Rios (18-0 11 KOs) proved too strong even for Mexico's veteran Sandro Marcos (29-19-2) in a lightweight bout. Rios dropped Marcos four times in two rounds, the last coming at 2:13 of the second round.

L.A. featherweight Abraham Lopez (3-0, 2 KOs) dominated a four-round bout against Colorado's Cuahtemoc Mendoza (4-9-1) with a combination of speed and precision punches. Mendoza proved resilient but couldn't match Lopez's speed. The judges scored it 40-35, 40-36, 39-36 for Lopez.

Texan Angel Rodriguez (3-2) was matched against Puerto Rico's undefeated knockout sensation Wilfredo Bones (5-1, 5 KOs) and surprised him with some slick moves and boxing technique. A fourth round knockdown from a left hook proved decisive for Rodriguez who won by split decision 40-36, 38-37, 37-39.

Puerto Rico's Hector Marengo (5-0-1) overcame a point deduction in the first round for hitting on the break to out-punch Florida's Jorge Ruiz (5-6-1) in a four round junior lightweight contest. A well-timed left hook in the fourth round dropped Ruiz. The judges scored it 39-35 for Marengo.