There is no more useful trialhorse in and around the welterweight division than David Estrada. He's been matched up with the best and the brightest in the game and can always be counted on to give a spirited showing, and let a more heralded man know where he stands in the sport.

On Friday night in a welterweight contest from the Chumash Casino in Santa Inez, CA., it was no exception. Estrada gave a spirited showing against untested Argentine Luis Carlos Abregu, but in typical fashion, he was unable to elevate to another level. Abregu earned a split decision win after ten rounds, and his handlers learned a little bit more exactly what they have in the man: someone with heavy hands, enough of a chin to move deeper into the division, and a heart that spurred him into staying focused and busy late in the fight when Estrada pressed him hard.

Showtime televised the action on the ShoBox program. There were no acknowledged knockdowns.

The judges saw it 98-92 (A), 96-94 (E), and 98-91 (A).

Can we lump Abregu in with other Estrada conquerors, like Shane Mosley, Kermit Cintron, Andre Berto and Jesus Soto Karass? Prob'ly not; the Argentine is a bit rawer than those more seasoned pros. But he showed enough solid traits that his arc bears watching moving into 2009.

The Argentine Abregu (24-0, 21 KOs entering; age 24) weighed 148 pounds while the Chicagoan Estrada (22-5, 13 KOs coming in; age 29) also tipped the scale at 148.

In the first, Abregu showed heavy hands. He showed good movement and a willingness to duck and slip. Estrada came forward, but was in feel 'em out mode. In the second, Estrada didn't get untracked and the Arg's quick hands gave him fits. In the third, Abregu, who generally shuns the jab as a setup weapon, found a home for the right up top. In the fourth, Estrada employed more upper body movement. That was fine, but his slower hands didn't hit the target enough. In round five, Estrada opened a cut on Abregu on his left eye. Estrada didn't get down on himself, and he smelled a shift in tone. Abregu ate several sharp rights, and held a couple times. In the sixth, the American launched lead rights. But Abregu regained his footing some. The contest had tightened. In the seventh, Abregu's low guard cost him a bit. His punch output had dropped by now, but Estrada posed too much as well. Abregu stole the round in the last 20 seconds. In the eighth, Abregu got much busier, but then Estrada got a burst of energy, and he ramped up in the last third of the frame. In the ninth, Abregu ran from Estrada, and ate some stiff shots. In the tenth, Estrada actually ran after his man, whose eye was bothering him. He got wobbled by a right, and his body language suggested he might get stopped. His left glove actually hit the canvas, but the ref missed it, and he finished the round. The judges would render the verdict.

Pennsylvanian Travis Kauffman (13-0 coming in; age 23; 221 pounds) met Chicago's Malachy Farrell (16-1 entering; age 29; 281 ½ pounds) in the ShoBox TV opener. Farrell sported a Santa

belly, and Kauffman surprisingly didn't target it from the start. But a left hook dropped Farrell, hard. But he countered Kauffman, and dropped him with a sneaky right. The first knockdown was much more severe. In the second, Kauffman, who helped Chris Arreola get ready for his bout two weeks ago, looked to land a bombing right. Farrell didn't crumble under his bulk, and we went into the third. Kauffman went lefty late in the second and came out lefthanded to start the third. He had Farrell caught on the ropes, and whaled away and we wondered if the beefy lad would last much longer. He ate body shots, an uppercut, a straight right, left hooks to the body, you name it. Ref Lou Moret stepped in, and halted the contest at 2:29 of the third.

SPEEDBAG Kendall Holt meets Ricardo Torres for the third time next Saturday at 11 PM on Showtime.