Winky Wright now understands why they have rehab starts in major league baseball.

When a pitcher is coming off a long layoff he is usually sent to the minor leagues for a few games to get his timing and his location back, the theory being that to step right in against major league bats is unwise and hazardous to one's professional life. Wright certainly would no longer dispute the wisdom of that after looking like he'd been hit by a lineup of bat-wielding boxers following last Saturday night's Massacre at Mandalay Bay against Paul Wiliams.

Predictably, both in corners of the media that should know better and from Williams supporters who are paid not to know better, the conclusion is that the former welterweight champion's utter domination of a 37-year-old man who had not boxed since losing his last fight to a then 42-year old opponent 21 months ago spoke volumes about his future. It did not. What it spoke to most was the foolhardy nature of Wright's decision to accept a bout against a man 10 years his younger who had fought top competition four times during Wright's long layoff.

Perhaps in the gyms where Wright spends his time the words "tuneup fight" are not understood but after the long-armed Williams finished slapping him silly for 12 rounds, they are now. Certainly Williams was busy, not only throwing 1,086 punches during the fight but launching a remarkable 104 in the first round and a more remarkable 106 in the last, and he deserves praise for it.

But part of the reason he was able to do that was that so little was coming back at him and what did boiled down to an average of less than 10 landed Wright punches per round. The usefulness of Compubox scores is subject to some debate but when one man is throwing twice as many punches as the other it tells you much about the state of each.

In this case it tells you more if one chooses to go beneath the surface just a bit. What it tells me is that Williams, at least as a middleweight, is no longer the big puncher he was as a welterweight. What it also tells me is that he is not a terribly accurate puncher. Throwing 1,086 punches in a 12-round fight certainly has its positive results but when you land only 247 of them (23 per cent) when you hold a massive reach advantage, even against a once adroit defensive fighter like Wright, it means you've wasted a lot of energy.

Wright was so far from the fighter he once had been that it took only a few rounds for him to be transformed into a catcher of the highest order, one whose face stopped Williams' jab and ate an uppercut that would never have touched the Winky that Wright used to be. Williams should not be penalized for that, and he likely won't be in the public's mind, but he also should not be given more credit than he deserves for beating up this old, black-and-white version of Winky Wright.

Despite the best efforts of HBO's broadcast team to try and convince viewers Wright was fighting well, the fact is he was not. He was fighting like what he now is, which is an old man

who could never punch but who once won with timing and quick reflexes that he now found out of sync and not likely to come back.

If one looks honestly at the Wright who was beaten down by Bernard Hopkins in 2007, the sad fact is he was by then already a fading fighter. At his best, Wright won because his defense was nearly perfect and his reaction time and punching accuracy remarkable. He frustrated opponents by being all but unassailable and then used that frustration against them when they began to take chances to try and hit him.

Those skills had clearly begun to fade by the time he faced Hopkins (a fight in which Wright was hit more than in any fight of his career save last Saturday's). Staying off the job for the next 21 months did nothing to sharpen what had long been his most important tools.

By the time Wright (51-5-1, 25 KO) got in with Williams (37-1, 27 KO) the skills that once had him on the pound-for-pound list of the world's best fighters for several years had rusted badly and the two-time welterweight champion predictably took good advantage of that. Williams' unusual reach (82 inches, which is an inch longer than heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko and two inches longer than Muhammad Ali's) makes life difficult for any opponent but when you add to that his left-handed stance and his ability to blunt an attacker's approach by tying him up before he gets into punching range there might have been no more difficult style for Wright to try and make a comeback against after so much time off.

In Wright's defense, he claims more logical opponents like Jermain Taylor and Kelly Pavlik, wanted no part of him. Maybe so but you can bet that is no longer the case for a lot of guys who once shunned Wright's advances after the way Williams dominated him. Wright unwisely but predictably said after the fight that he intends to continue boxing and he may now find that easier than it used to be because his vulnerabilities are more apparent. That doesn't make it a wise choice, just an easier one with which to do business.

Wright's inability to simply move his head efficiently, as he had throughout his career and for which his trainer Dan Birmingham kept pleading without results on Saturday night, was telling. That one thing alone made Williams' jab and, more importantly his upper cut, look more efficient than they might have been otherwise.

Add to that the fact so little was coming back from Wright and what did carried so little impact and it created a perfect scenario for Williams and the perfect storm for poor Wright. So while it would be difficult anymore to argue about the decline of Winky Wright, what does the victory say about Paul Williams?

First off, it says that while he can function at 160 pounds or perhaps even higher he cannot punch at that weight. Frankly, he was never as big a puncher as some tried to claim but at 160 he has no more than average power at best. With his long jab and southpaw style that may be enough to confound Pavlik but it won't be enough to keep him off him and out of punching range and with a heavy-handed guy like that distance is they key to victory, as Hopkins showed.

It appears Williams' promoter, Dan Goossen, understands that. After the fight, even as he was

talking about the possibilities of Williams staying at middleweight or even moving up to 168, he conceded that he is really a welterweight and that is where they want to campaign. That would be a wise move because at 147, Williams is a physical freak with those long arms and 6-2 frame and is a more powerful puncher.

How much damage he can do there is dependent on whether he can force the welterweight division's top names - Miguel Cotto, Joshua Clottey, Andre Berto and Shane Mosley – to square off with him. None were all that excited about it in the past and his win over Wright won't make them any more encouraged. Then again, HBO could decide to get behind him and force the matter, just as they basically forced Wright to fight Williams after giving him a list of six acceptable opponents that would get him back on TV.

Four of the six refused the opportunity, a decision they likely now regret. A fifth, Vernon Forrest, was refused by Wright because of a close personal friendship between the two. That left only Williams if Wright wasn't willing to go off TV for a tuneup match or two. He chose the money and paid for it.

Now Paul Williams must choose in a different way. He must choose to return to his natural and most effective weight, 147, and campaign there until someone like Cotto has to fight him. Or he can continue to try and find work in a division, 160, that is not best suited to him and which really has only one guy with whom to make money, a guy named Kelly Pavlik who doesn't need to fight a 6-2 southpaw with an 82-inch reach nor does he intend to.