Weeks of monastic discipline and physical torment, years of voracious ambition and superior athletic endeavour merged on Saturday to produce an exhilarating contest between Carl Froch and Jean Pascal.

Both fighters entered the ring in Nottingham with unblemished records and unyielding self belief, but after twelve rounds Froch emerged with a unanimous decision victory to claim the World Boxing Council's 168-pound title and assert his presence near the top of the 168-pound division.

Denmark's Mikkel Kessler will claim recognition as the premier super middleweight after Joe Calzaghe's departure, but Froch's display of powerful punching and resolve must propel the English fighter toward consideration as the world's finest.

Before Saturday, the 31-year-old Froch was unproven as a viable world-class commodity, as he breezed through his previous 23 fights, performing within his ability against over-matched opposition. But in front of 7,000 vociferous fans at the Trent FM Arena, Froch encountered a fighter with the ability to test the limits of his physical talent and mental toughness.

In a wild, free-swinging fight that remained enthralling throughout, Froch displayed greater defiance in the face of adversity to outlast Pascal and inflict the first loss on the Canadian's professional record. Neither fighter had ever been challenged in such a hostile manner, but Froch was more adept at performing outside his comfort zone, willing to stand his ground and land a more sustained offence.

Both combatants showed admirable skills in attack and defense, but both chose to exchange powerful hooks and crosses with regularity.

"This fight lived up to some of the best super middleweight fights I've ever seen," lauded former world featherweight champion Barry McGuigan. "Breathtaking stuff."

Pascal ordinarily aims to glide around opponents, avoiding their attacks with sharp reflexes before unloading accurate strikes of his own. But on Saturday he was unable to impose his tempo on the contest as he came upon a fighter with a deceptively effective jerky defense and composed aggression.

Froch, 24-0 (19), was the antagonist early, immediately pushing Pascal to the ropes with a solid jab-right cross salvo. A bemused Pascal struggled to find his rhythm, as Froch took control of the ring's center, unleashing powerful combinations.

Pascal managed to avoid getting hit with a succession of clean blows as he habitually moved at the waist, lowering his body towards Froch and holding when within reaching distance. But as the rounds progressed, Pascal relaxed and when Froch attacked, the Canadian fighter

consistently responded with a forceful hook or uppercut.

Textbook technique did not always prevail, as Froch's long punches were met by heavy counters from Pascal, to which the Brit responded with equally untamed blows.

A powerful left hook landed squarely on Froch's jaw in the second round, but the Nottingham native absorbed the shot, remaining firm-legged. But as the fighters frantically exchanged fierce blows towards the end of the fifth, Pascal drilled Froch with a straight right at the bell that visibly staggered the hometown fighter, drawing a warning from referee Guido Cavalleri.

Froch showed no ill effects in the subsequent round, as the back-and-forth conflict resumed. Yet in the eight a chopping left hook from Pascal opened a cut on the edge of Froch's right eye.

The blood seemed to distract Froch in the ninth, as he frequently dabbed at the cut, but his corner managed to stem the flow at the round's end, helping their fighter assert his control over the final three frames. Froch's trainer, former middleweight contender Robert McCracken, urged his charge to utilize the jab and Froch duly obliged.

Froch was more active as the contest drew to a close, landing a head-snapping lead left with increasing steadiness, while Pascal's right eye began to swell noticeably. The Canadian was frequently holding, visibly tiring, but he gamely fought back enough to keep Froch on edge.

Both fighters battled against exhaustion in the closing moments of the bout, exchanging power shots to the delight of the partisan crowd.

The judges' scores of 118-110, 117-111 and 116-112 didn't reflect the competitive nature of the combat, but there were no protests from the beaten fighter.

"I thought the fight was a little bit closer, but the best man won tonight," conceded a magnanimous Pascal, 21-1 (14). "Carl stayed strong throughout the fight."

Despite perpetually fronting unwavering self-assurance and lofty ambitions, Froch admitted to keeping a grounded approach throughout his six year career. "To be honest, when I turned pro I never really had the WBC world title in my sights. It was always just one step at a time," he said. "But it's unbelievable and I'm elated. [Pascal] was here to win. I did well to outlast him. I want to unify belts now."

The fight marked a return to major network TV for boxing in Great Britain and despite the major events in Las Vegas and Amir Khan's blowout of Oisin Fagan in London, the spirited Froch-Pascal clash was a headline-grabbing event for all the right reasons.

"People keep saying 'boxing is dying'," said McGuigan. "But boxing won't die with fights like Froch-Pascal."