CHICAGO-It happens from time to time. Occasionally a boxer can so raise his game that he has the fight of his life against an opponent who by rights should not only be tougher but more gifted. Sometimes this performance goes for naught, simply because it seems such an aberration that judges can't quite believe what their own eyes seeing -- and that, more than anything else, would appear to explain the scorecards of Raul Caiz and David Sutherland down in Houston back in August. Fortunately for Paulie Malignaggi, there was a third judge seated at ringside that night, and before he went to bed Saturday night, if he ever went to bed at all, we trust that Malignaggi got down on his hands and knees and thanked the Almighty for Gale Van Hoy, because if it weren't for him and his 118-110 scorecard, there's no way in the world Paulie would have gotten the chance to do what he did here.

In many respects rematches can be fairly predictable. It is rarer still that you'll see an underdog who has come up short the first time raise his game yet again and, essentially, come up with the fight of his life twice in a row. But Malignaggi is clearly cut from a different cloth than most boxers, and while he was still performing before an audience of (mostly) Juan Diaz fans Saturday night at the University of Illinois-Chicago Pavilion, he staged a virtuoso performance that three neutral judges weren't about to deny him.

On paper, Malignaggi's only natural edge over Diaz would be in hand speed, but this time around he not only out-quicked the Baby Bull, but repeatedly frustrated him with a crafty game plan and an improved defense, and on those occasions when he deigned to stop and slug with the slugger, more than held his own in that department as well. Although it wasn't much of one, Malignaggi was credited with the only knockdown of the night, and didn't come close to going down himself. And if he got wobbled once or twice, he wobbled Diaz on at least half a dozen occasions.

Malignaggi set the tone as he out-boxed Diaz early, and by taking the first two rounds staked himself to a lead he would never relinquish. By the midpoint of the 12-round fray he had Diaz cut along the right eyebrow, and while that wound never really became a factor, neither was Diaz exactly encouraged by the sight of his own blood.

Mainly, though, the bout turned on Malignaggi's ability to establish a distance from which he could torment Diaz with his jab -- and from which Diaz found it extremely difficult to connect with his own.

If Malignaggi's punches are usually more annoying than genuinely troublesome, but on at least one occasion a jab from Paulie seemed to stagger Diaz, and while the Baby Bull did his level best to turn it into a slugfest, he didn't always like what happened when he did.

Malignaggi seemed so in command, in fact, that the only real danger was that his mugging and woofing -- at one point late in the fight he turned to engage the HBO broadcast table in conversation even as he dodged Diaz' furious charge -- might infuriate a couple of judges

enough to turn them into Van Hoys.

The two were at close quarters in the tenth when Malignaggi lashed out with a chopping right hand that sends Diaz spinning ass over teakettle. He never did hit the deck, but his effort to stay upright either his glove hit the canvas, or came close enough to doing so that referee Geno Rodriguez thought that it had, and when the Illinois referee administered a count, it put the fight pretty much out of reach.

Rather than protect what seemed to be a rock-solid lead, Malignaggi even accommodated Diaz by engaging him toe-to-toe down the stretch. The principal result of that was that the blood was pouring from Diaz' cut at the bell.

In the end Mauro DiFiore (Illinois), Tom Miller (Ohio) and Mike Pernick (Florida) returned identical 116-111 scorecards. (TSS' scorecard had it 115-112; how Gale Van Hoy scored it from his living room back in Texas remains unlearned.)

"All I needed," said Malignaggi after the verdict was returned, "was a fair shake."

Diaz, followed by his corner men, barged straight out of the ring and into the locker room afterward, while Malignaggi, who just four months earlier had acknowledged what seemed the most likely result of the Houston fight when he said "I'm an opponent now," was talking about fighting Juan Manuel Marquez and Ricky Hatton.

He may not get either -- it would seem far more likely that they might fight each other, and that's if Hatton fights again at all -- but what he will earn by this performance is a few more high-profile HBO fights, and possibly even a crack at another world title.

"The key to this fight was staying committed to my game plan," said the former junior welterweight champion, now 27-3. "The idea was to utilize my strengths, and by keeping Diaz on the defensive so he couldn't set up to use his power."

Although he allowed himself to be drawn into more close-quarters exchanges than would have seemed prudent, Malignaggi noted that "I took his punches pretty well, even when he hit me flush."

Diaz, 26-3 after the loss, was described by Malignaggi as "a class act and a great fighter."

Less than six months after his surprise KO at the hands of Argentina's Marcos Maidana, former prospect of the year Victor Ortiz bounced back with an impressive performance that went into the books as a 7th-round TKO when his fellow Mexican Antonio Diaz (45-6-1) failed to answer the bell for that stanza.

Ortiz (25-2-1) had patiently opened up in a counterpunching mode, but was plainly annoyed when, in the second round, Diaz grabbed him in a clinch but then decided to keep punching anyway. When Ortiz wound up on the deck, although referee Gerald Scott ruled no knockdown, he got up mean, and before the round was over Diaz was sporting a gash to the bridge of his

nose.

The third round brought the fight's only knockdown. As Diaz waded in to throw a one-two combination, Ortiz waved a pawing right and then drilled him with a counter straight left up the middle.

Ortiz, who for the first couple of rounds had shown his jab mainly as a decoy, began to throw it in earnest at this stage of the fight, establishing a tone of dominance that would endure through the balance of the night. In he fifth Diaz was cut above the left eye from what Scott ruled a butt, but even had the issue gone to the scorecards, Ortiz was comfortably in front.

In the sixth the blood was flowing copiously that Scott called time and invited the ringside physician up for a look-see. The doctor allowed it to continue, but over in Diaz' corner they seemed to wish he hadn't. When the bell rang for the seventh, trainer Romulo Quirarte signaled that his man wasn't coming out.

"I respect my corner's decision," said Diaz, who certainly didn't argue with it. Ortiz, who had out-landed him 97-37 while it lasted, had a whopping 23-6 connect edge over the last three minutes they fought.

It was another nice scalp for Ortiz. Diaz hasn't a lot of tread left on the tire, but this is a guy who nine and a half years ago scored back-to-back wins over Omar Weis and Mickey Ward to earn himself a title shot against Shane Mosley, and while he didn't do so well in that one, Diaz has been in with the big boys.

"I actually felt pretty rusty at first," said Ortiz. "But as the fight went on I started feeling a little more comfortable, and was able to use my jab more."

And he has, from all indications, managed to put the Maidana loss behind him.

"These things happen for a reason," said Ortiz. "It's time to move on."

The co-feature had been preceded by a ceremonial 10-count as part of a tribute to the late Francisco Rodriguez, a popular local favorite and 5-time Chicago Golden Gloves champion who died as the result of injuries incurred against Teon Kennedy in a bout at Philadelphia's Blue Horizon three weeks ago.

Former WBO 140-pound champ Randall Bailey knocked down Germaine Sanders in the first, second, and fifth rounds but was unable to put the elderly Chicagoan away and had to settle for a unanimous decision (Mike Fitzgerald 78-71, Jerry Jakubco 79-70, Patrick Morley 77-72) in their eight-round prelim. All three knockdowns came with right hands, but Bailey explained later "I hurt my [right] hand on his head" in administering the last one and had difficulty pulling the trigger thereafter. Bailey is now 40-7, Sanders 27-8.

Fighting for just the second time since his March upset at the hands of Harry Joe Yorgey and with his illustrious father watching from a ringside seat, 30-year old junior middle Ronald Hearns

scored a 6th-round TKO of Kenyan Shadrack Kipruto (10-12) to advance his own pro record to 23-1.

Hearns appeared to wobble Kipruto several times in the second, and just before the conclusion of the round, stiffened him with a left and then dropped him with a short, cuffing right thrown over the top. Hearns dominated the intervening action, but it wasn't until the sixth that he put the Kenyan down again. When he did -- with a hard left hook -- Kipruto hit the canvas with such force that referee Pete Podgorski didn't even think about counting but waved it off at 2:33 of the round..

Highly touted Texas junior welter Omar Figueroa celebrated his final hours as a teenager (he would turn 20 the next day) when referee Celistino Cruz rescued outclassed Bahamian opponent Anthony Woods at 1:46 of the second. It was the 8th KO in as many pro fights for Figueroa, who still has yet to see a fourth round. Woods slips to 6-13.

Two other Texas 19 year-olds posted wins on the Chicago under card. One of them, Houstonian Jermell Charlo, interrupted a spirited battle of unbeaten welterweights with stunning (literally) second-round knockout of Abdon Lozano. Lozano, who had gone down in the opening seconds, battled his way back and was confidently swarming ahead, winging punches with both hands, when Charlo, purely in self-defense, threw a short left uppercut as he tried to keep him off him. The punch caught Lozano off balance and flipped him over backward, but he landed hard, the back of his head smashing off the canvas, and was unable to respond before Cruz had reached the count of 10 at 2:11 of the round. Charlo is now 10-0, Lozano 6-1.

The other Houston junior welter Hylon Williams Jr., posted 80-72 tallies on the scores of all three judges (Ted Gimza, William Lerch, Bulmarow Camuzano Jr,) for a unanimous decision over Mexican journeyman Humberto Tapia (14-12-1) to make his record 12-0.

Welterweight Jimmy Herrera had a memorable, if brief, pro debut, requiring just 28 seconds to stop fellow Chicagoan Gustavo Palacios (2-7), Herrera put his more experienced foe down with a furious flurry that brought the crowd to its feet, and although Palacios made it to his feet, referee John O'Brien had seen enough.

Brooklyn-based former Dominican Olympian Argenis Mendez improved to 15-1 with a unanimous, if not exactly overwhelming, decision (80-72 Fitzgerald and Morley; 78-72 Jakubco) over Kenya's Morris Chule (7-8-1).

In a 10-tounder just before the televised portion of the card, Cuban middleweight Erislandy Lara stayed perfect at 9-0 with a one-sided decision over Chicago-based Mexican Luciano Perez (17-01-1). Perez was tough as nails and very willing, but simply out of his depth; his face looked like it had been through a meat grinder by the end. Robert Heckel scored it 100-90, John McCarthy and Gary Kruse 99-91.

A pair of heavyweight bouts had opened the show. Dominick Guinn (32-6-1) won an uninspired but unanimous decision over Arizonan Charles Davis (19-18-2). McCarthy scored in a shutout at 60-54, while Heckel and Kruse had it 58-56. Earlier, Guinn's Sugar Land (Tex.) neighbor

Darlington Agha (2-0) was awarded a second-round TKO when his opponent Terry Adams quit, only a second after the bell had rung to begin round two.

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At IUC Pavilion

Chicago, Illinois

December 12, 2009

JUNIOR WELTERS: Paulie Malignaggi, 138 1/2, Brooklyn, NY dec. Juan Diaz, 138 1/2, Houston, Texas (12)

Hylon Williams Jr., 137, Houston dec. Humberto Tapia, 137, Tijuana, Mexico (8)

Omar Figueroa, 138 1/2, Weslaco, Tex. TKO'd Anthony Woods, 137 1/2, Nassau, Bahamas (2)

HEAVYWEIGHTS: Dominick Guinn, 239, Hot Springs, Ark. dec. Charles Davis, 214, Tucson, Ariz. (6)

Darlington Agha, 239, Sugar Land, Tex. TKO'd Terry Adams, 209, Huntsville, Ala. (2)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Erislandy Lara, 155 1/2, Guantanamo, Cuba dec. Luciano Perez, 155 1/2, Michoacan, Mexico (8)

JUNIOR MIDDLES: Ronald Hearns, 154, Southfield, Mich. TKO'd Shadrack Kipruto, 154 1/2, Nairobi, Kenya (6)

WELTERWEIGHTS: Victor Ortiz, 144, Garden City, Kansas TKO'd Antonio Diaz, 144, Jiquilpan, Mexico (7)

Randall Bailey, 148, Miami, Fla. dec. Germaine Sanders, 146 1/2, Chicago, Ill. (8)

Jermell Charlo, 146 1/2, Houston, Tex, KO'd Abdon Lozano, 146 1/2, Las Vegas, Nev. (2)

Jimmy Herrera, 146, Chicago, Ill. TKO'd Gustavo Palacios, 148, Chicago (2)

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHTS: Argenis Mendez, 130, San Juan de la Maguana, Dominican Rep. dec. Morris Chule, 129 1/2, Nairobi, Kenya (8)