Mundine stands atop his world

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ANTHONY Mundine climbed the ropes, pointed to his chest and announced: "I'm the man, I'm the man, I'm No.1."

The referee had not even announced the result but the home-town fighter knew he had done enough. Mundine is the new WBA super-middleweight champion of the world -- a belt denied his father Tony more than 30 years ago.

Mundine defeated the more experienced, heavier-hitting Antwun Echols, defying the doubters, the odds and experts. On a night when many expected the Australian to be knocked out early, he out-boxed and out-thought his opponent to take a clear points victory.

He revealed after the fight at the Sydney Entertainment Centre that he had been carrying a broken rib for the past month.

Mundine's feat is remarkable. In just three years of boxing and with only 20 fights under his belt, he has climbed to the top of his field after abandoning a promising rugby league career to follow in the footsteps of his father Tony, who was in the corner for the fight.

His short career includes only one loss, in a premature world title bout against Germany's Sven Ottke in 2001 after just 10 bouts. Last night's victory fulfilled a promise Mundine made to his father, who came close to winning a world title but lost to Carlos Monzon.

Echols proved his sense of humour, arriving in the ring to the sound of Men At Work's Down Under and carrying the US and Australian flags.

He took his place in the red corner, sharing the stage with a troupe of Aboriginal dancers. Mundine was then introduced as "representing the Aboriginal man Down Under". He made the American wait at least five minutes before entering to a deafening roar, carrying the Aboriginal and Australian flags.

The early rounds were even with both fighters landing good punches, although Mundine riled Echols with a late blow coming out of a clinch in the second. Mundine kept moving away from the American, tying him up when possible, causing complaints from Echols' corner to the referee.

The Australian appeared to gain the upper hand in the third round with a series of stinging jabs and gained even more confidence in the fourth, warming to his task and out-boxing Echols. The American started to land some hard blows late in the sixth

round but Mundine was able to counterpunch.

By the seventh, they were both slugging it out, with Mundine landing a good uppercut late in the round.

Both fighters ended the eighth on the canvas after slipping and Echols also finished with swelling under the left eye. By the ninth, the home crowd was on its feet and chanting, convinced their man was on top.

Echols came back in the 10th and 11th, showing better stamina as Mundine started to tire. But Mundine held his own in the final round to take the bout.

The Australian had seemed nervous and uncomfortable in the lead-up to the fight, pulling out of the original bout after complaining of a virus -- a decision which cost his camp a lot of money and led to allegations he was frightened.

The fight attracted an A-list of Sydney sporting and media stars and the odd politician, including former prime minister Paul Keating.

Mundine's appearance attracted a huge number of rugby league stars to the $500 seats, including former St George Illawarra team-mates Lance Thompson, Shaun Timmins, Nathan Blacklock and coaching staff.

Cronulla's Jason Stevens, Canterbury's Hazem El Masri and Willie Mason, Manly's Solomon Haumono, Brisbane captain Gorden Tallis, Paul Harragon, Peter Sterling and Paul Vautin were also ringside.

Mundine's sparring partner, former kickboxing world champion, Gurkan Ozkan, warmed up the crowd with a brutal victory in the main undercard fight against the plucky Rico Chong Nee.