Peter Manfredo Jr. of Providence, Rhode Island, will become the first fighter from “The Contender” reality television series to challenge for a world title when he takes on long-reigning 168-pound king Joe Calzaghe at the Millennium Stadium in Calzaghe’s home country of Wales on March 3, 2007. At least 40,000, but as many as 80,000 fans, are expected to be in attendance.

The fight, which will be broadcast live on HBO World Championship Boxing at 5:00 P.M. and on tape delay at 10:00 P.M., will mark the 20th WBO title defense for Calzaghe, who, despite being a champion for nine years, did not catapult onto the international scene until he won a shockingly easy one-sided decision over the heavily favored American Jeff Lacy in Manchester, England, on March 4, 2006.

The Calzaghe-Manfredo Jr. title bout was officially announced at a press conference at the ultra-chic Hotel Gansevoort, which is located in New York’s Meatpacking District, on November 28.

“I’m not Jeff Lacy,” said the 26-year-old Manfredo Jr., 26-3 (12 KOS), whose only losses were on points to Alfonso Gomez and Sergio Mora (twice), the latter of whom was the eventual winner on the first season of “The Contender.”

“I’m not one-dimensional. I know I’m a big underdog, but I’m alright with that. I like football and I bet on underdogs all the time. Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose. He calls himself the Italian Dragon but I’m the Italian Warrior and I’m going to change history. Nineteen title defenses is good enough.”

Manfredo Jr. has no qualms about fighting Calzaghe in his home country and realizes that a victory under such circumstances will only enhance his worldwide appeal.

“He’s the man, he’s in demand and in control,” said Manfredo Jr. “England, Las Vegas, his backyard, my backyard; we still have to get in the ring and fight. He’s a great champion, but I consider myself a great challenger. This is boxing. No one said it is easy. Life ain’t easy. I’ll do whatever it takes to win, and reap the benefits later.”

“I’m not going to underestimate Peter at all,” said the 34-year-old Calzaghe, 42-0 (31 KOS), who was raised in Wales and is of Italian/Welsh extraction. “He has a massive heart and will bring his A-game. It’s going to be a tough fight, but I will still be champion when it’s over.”

Both fighters were lured into boxing by their fathers, each of whom still plays active roles in the careers. Peter Manfredo Sr., 50, is a former world kickboxing champion who boxed professionally from 1989-92 and compiled a 5-2-2 (1 KO) record.

Calzaghe’s father Enzo, a onetime professional musician, has trained his son since his first

amateur fight.

Although outwardly calm, you can sense the intensity that bubbles just under the surface of Manfredo Sr. He wholeheartedly believes that his son has the skills, as well as the grit, mettle and determination to emerge victorious from the biggest fight of his life.

“I’m calm now because the fight is four months away,” he said. “As the fight gets closer, I’ll be more nervous than him. Nothing fazes him. I’ve been in his corner since he’s five years old, and I see him everyday. He’s got tremendous composure.”

“Boxing was drilled into me since I was a baby,” said Manfredo Jr. “As soon as I came out of my mother, my father said look at the size of his hands and said I was going to be a fighter.”

As a youngster Manfredo Jr. admits that he fought to fulfill his father’s dreams, but says he now fights for himself, as well as his wife, two daughters, Alexis, 4, and Mercedes, 14 months, and the baby that is on the way.

If his third child is a boy, Manfredo Jr. would never encourage him to be a fighter. “I would teach him how to fight, but wouldn’t wish this life on anybody,” he said. “The fighting part is easy. It’s all the days in the gym and the (Spartan) lifestyle that is so hard.”

Although Manfredo Jr. attended Catholic school throughout his life, he says he was not a good student. Disinterested in his studies, he found it hard to pay attention and was more of a class clown than a scholastic achiever.

He says he sometimes gets depressed because, although he worked briefly as an electrician, fighting is the only livelihood he knows.

“I realize you are always just one punch away from retirement,” he said. “After doing this for so long, I don’t know what else I’d be qualified for.”

Should Manfredo Jr. beat Calzaghe, he probably won’t have to worry about finding other employment for as long as he lives.

Sugar Ray Leonard, who is a major part of “The Contender” franchise, said that this fight has the potential to bring boxing back to “what it used to be in the seventies and eighties.”

Jeff Wald, who along with Mark Burnett, produces “The Contender,” said Calzaghe is unquestionably a Hall of Fame Fighter and described Manfredo Jr. as being like Arturo Gatti, in that he would rather die than be in a bad fight.

Burnett added that he felt like “The Contender” already won because Manfredo Jr. is the first alumnus to challenge for a world title. Having been raised in the United Kingdom, Burnett said that he felt “like a kid in a candy store who can’t wait for the fight to start.”

Regardless of who is victorious, Calzaghe-Manfredo Jr. is one of the most eagerly anticipated

matchups of the coming year. Should it be Calzaghe, which is what most people expect, he will lobby for a mega-fight against the no longer retired Bernard Hopkins.

If it is the charismatic Manfredo, who trains in Los Angeles with the esteemed Freddie Roach, another transplanted New Englander, there will be no limits on how high his popularity can soar. Talking to his father, you get the impression that in his head his namesake winning is already a done deal.

“Joe Calzaghe is tricky and awkward, but this is the right time to take his title,” said Manfredo Sr. “My kid is fundamentally sound. Working with Freddie (Roach) will prepare him for anything. I know that he can pull this off. He will pull this off.”