Lance Whitaker is, quite literally, a big step up for Jason Estrada.

The former U.S. Olympian and Pan American Games gold medalist will try to enhance his career path Friday night on ESPN2's Friday Night Fights when "Big 6,'' short for six feet tall, steps in with "Nearly Big 7'', a 6-foot-8-inch former world title contender.

As match-ups go, it's certainly the long and the short of it in heavyweight boxing, even though Whitaker had not fought in 26 months before stopping the deservedly unknown Ron Johnson (22-24) just six weeks ago.

Estrada is a far different proposition than Johnson, who was there for only one purpose. He was there to end up unconscious, which he wasted no time in doing. Now the 35-year-old Whitaker finds himself coming to the hometown of a different sort of heavyweight, a heavyweight still on the rise. Someone who knows why he's here too, and it's not to get knocked out by Lance Whitaker.

"I want to make sure he's going backwards every step of the fight,'' Estrada (11-1, 2 KO) said Tuesday after completing a final training workout. "I got to be all the way in or all the way out against this guy. He's got a reach of like 82 inches so the one thing you have to be careful about is not standing in a spot where you can't hit him but he can still hit you.

"I see him as a step up because he has a lot of professional experience but every time he stepped up in class he got beat (being stopped by Luan Krasniqi and future world champion Sultan Ibragimov in 2005, the latter being the loss that retired him for over two years, as well as losing decisions to Jameel McCline in 2001 and Lou Savarese in 1999).

"So I'm looking at this fight as a chance to show my skills and prepare myself for some of the other big guys I'll have to fight to win a championship. There's a whole bunch of these guys out there now, so it's great experience for me.''

Estrada didn't say it, but what he implied was that it will not be a great experience for Whitaker (32-4-1, 27 KO) despite his knockout ratio and the fact that he once stopped future heavyweight champion Oleg Maskaev. That win was the most significant of his career but it came seven years ago, which is a lifetime in boxing.

Everything is different now. Maskaev is probably ready to retire after losing the WBC title to Samuel Peter, Estrada is a young prospect whose hand and foot speed Whitaker admits he's never seen before in a heavyweight and the giant from Van Nuys, CA. is trying to comeback in a sport where he never quite lived up to his hype.

The 27-year-old Estrada knows winning is paramount in a situation like this one if he wants his career to continue moving forward but he also realizes he has been criticized for his

cautiousness and an apparent lack of knockout power. No one questions that he has among the fastest hands in the division but what he doesn't have yet is a deep well of experience or the kind of resume of a Whitaker. What that means is questions remain to be answered, one small one being whether he can handle a man so physically imposing.

"This is the kind of fight that gets us prepared for the future,'' said Estrada's father Roland, who trains and manages him. "If you can't deal with guys this tall you're not preparing yourself to win in the heavyweight division.

"Jason is doing well but I would have loved for him to have a national title by now like an NABF or an NABO title. I think he's ready for guys like (U.S. prospect Eddie) Chambers or (Russian contender Alexander) Povetkin or these other prospects if they'd pay us, but they aren't ready to do that. We've tried to get (towering) Tye Fields but he won't fight us.

"But I'm satisfied with the way it's going. In some ways I like him fighting these, I guess you'd say third tier, guys to get experience. I've asked for (David) Tua or (Fres) Oquendo or (Hasim) Rahman but they're not easy to get. A lot of those guys are trying to get back into the picture themselves so they're not looking to fight someone like Jason.''

While that has been an irritant to his father and his promoter, Providence's Jimmy Burchfield, Estrada himself is more understanding. He wants to one day be where those fighters have been, especially Rahman, who once knocked out Lennox Lewis to win the heavyweight title, but he realizes they have no obligation to help him along the way. At least not yet.

"I understand completely,'' Estrada said. "If I was them I wouldn't do it either. They have too much to lose. I understand why they won't fight some snot-nosed kid who's good. What do they have to gain?

"What I need to do is keep winning and get myself into a position where they have to fight me. I'm not there yet but I'm working hard to prepare myself.''

It will take more nights like Friday against more opponents like Whitaker to reach that point, but Jason Estrada believes he'll figure out a way to do it just as he'll figure out a way to avoid Whitaker's long arms and get in a position where the advantage will be his.

At least he has some experience solving this particular type of problem. Six years ago, while then one of the U.S.' highest rated amateurs, Estrada went to Cuba and found himself in the ring with a 6-foot-9 mountain of a heavyweight. What he did with him, and to him, is what he hopes to do to Lance Whitaker, a guy whose nickname fittingly is "Mount.''

"This was a big, big dude,'' Estrada said of the Cuban whose name he could not recall but whose visage he has not forgotten. "He looked like a normal guy just bigger. He was shredded, but I look at these kinds of guys like normal guys. Actually I never thought a guy over 6-foot-5 would be that good in the ring. It's hard to be that big and not become robotic. It's really a disadvantage, in my opinion.

“With that guy I got inside on his chest and once I touched his chin a few times he went out. It was over.’’

Estrada would like nothing better than to do the same to Whitaker because he is well aware that a legion of critics feel he has as glaring a power deficiency as downtown Baghdad at midnight. Estrada’s father also hopes his son will find ways to attack Whitaker in a meaningful fashion because he knows it remains the major knock against him and the question about him that remains unanswered: Can Jason Estrada punch hard enough to survive against the top heavyweights?

“I kind of wish his opponents would cooperate more and come in trying to win,’’ Roland Estrada said. “I think he hits hard enough to stop guys but they can’t deal with his hand speed so they go into a shell after a few rounds and make it impossible for them to win and for Jason to knock them out.

“People criticize him for that and even I’d like to see him become more exciting but look at Povetkin. He’s in title contention and is he exciting? With the right person in front of him Jason can be exciting.’’

Time will tell if that person will be the towering presence of Lance Whitaker but one thing is sure: physically at least he’s a step up and then some for Jason Estrada.