Eric Gomez has made clear to WBO super bantamweight champion Daniel Ponce De Leon that his moment has come. Tonight. When he faces undefeated No. 1 contender Juan Manuel Lopez on the under card of the Kelly Pavlik-Gary Lockett middleweight title fight, it must be SHOWTIME even though the fight is on HBO. Anything less and he may be out of time.

This may sound odd when you consider that the 27-year-old Ponce De Leon has been the 122-pound champion for the past 2 1/2 years and will be making the seventh defense of the title he first won by out pointing Thailand's Sod Looknongyangtoy. But there is more these days to appearing on big cable shows than simply winning boxing matches. There are style points to be won as well, of which Ponce De Leon doesn't get many.

During his reign Ponce has certainly had some glorious moments, like the night he destroyed undefeated Rey Bautista in two and a half minutes or his 52 second knockout of Looknongyangtoy in their rematch. But he has also had too many nights where he fought like a ball in tall weeds - he was lost - and that simply cannot happen again in his first appearance on HBO's World Championship Boxing…at least not if he wants a second.

If it does, Gomez, Oscar De La Hoya's chief matchmaker at Golden Boy Promotions, and Joe Hernandez, who has directed Ponce De Leon's career from the start, know what is likely to follow – a star search in a new galaxy.

"Whenever you get an opportunity on HBO Championship Boxing you have to perform,'' Gomez said. "Your future depends on it. We've done all we can do for Ponce. Now it's up to him. There will be a few million fans watching. He has to show them what he's capable of.

"We signed him after four fights. I've made every match for him and every time he fights I'm on pins and needles. Because of his punching power he can beat any fighter in that weight class but he's not technically sound so he can also be beaten by anyone.

"His performances have been peaks and valleys. He's knocked out some guys with one punch but sometimes he just seems to lose focus and that gets him in trouble.''

If Ponce De Leon (34-1, 30 KO) wins in any fashion he will retain both his title and the power of Golden Boy behind him, but he has had that for most of his career and not yet landed an opportunity like the one he has now. To fight not only fiercely, which is his habit, but also intelligently, which is not, is what will be demanded, because while it is all well and good to fight with "reckless fury,'' as De La Hoya once described Ponce De Leon's style, recklessness has its limits.

Ponce De Leon seemed to reach them in December in his disappointing points victory over Eduardo Escobedo on the Hatton-Mayweather undercard. It was a fight in which he often looked confused and amateurish. If one delivers a knockout at the end of such a night you might

get away with that but if you end up simply slogging your way to victory, as he did, you don't stay on HBO's big stage for long because at that level more than victory is required.

"He's exciting to watch but it would be the happiest moment of my life if I can see some improved technique, some calmness, some control of the pace of the fight with his jab and with counter punching against Lopez,'' Hernandez said from Los Angeles. "Our last fight we took a beating from this kid who was not at Daniel's level.

"That's why this fight is so important. I honestly believe this is it. This fight will make or break him. If he looks good there are a lot of big fights for him in the division. If he doesn't, it becomes a lot more difficult to get back on HBO.''

Ponce De Leon is one of the heaviest punchers in the super bantamweight division but his defensive flaws and offensive impatience are often painfully obvious and trouble producing for him. In the gym he is said to be a different fighter, one more patient on offense and more adept on defense.

Perhaps so but when the cameras arrive he has too often reverted to the wild-eyed and overly aggressive traits that have made him a fan favorite but a baffling contradiction to those closest to him.

"We got a lot of holes,'' conceded Hernandez wearily. "Daniel Ponce De Leon is not liked because he's Sugar Ray Leonard. He's liked because he comes out like a whirlwind. He's like a rainstorm. You can't get away from all those raindrops.

"But Ponce has to show he belongs with the top fighters. All he's lacking is control. Show that and he'll hit the jackpot.''

The jackpot Saturday night would be the kind of solid but also sundering performance that would begin to bring pressure on Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez, the division's marquee names, to square off with him. If he can impress HBO Sports' executives with a dominating performance that would add to the pressure on them in the way that counts most – growing interest in a showdown which means growing money in the pot to do it.

Because of the size of their checkbook, if HBO wants a fight made it gets made with few exceptions. Certainly if Ponce De Leon can impress them against Lopez they would be inclined to push harder for a bigger fight, especially with Marquez, who is looking for such a match before the end of the year after twice losing to Vazquez in violent fashion.

"We've all told him how important this night is for him on Championship Boxing,'' Hernandez said. "A fighter doesn't get a lot of these kinds of opportunities. He has to use them when they come along.

"I told him, 'Daniel, you don't put on a good performance I'll quit and go open a taco stand.'"

Considering the remainder of Hernandez's stable of fighters that is not likely but Ponce De Leon

understands that Gomez and Hernandez have a point. But he also understands himself and what happens when he feels the pressure of a challenge.

“This fight I have to win dramatically,’’ Ponce De Leon admitted. “I have to win convincingly to draw people’s attention.

“I got all the confidence in myself that I can unify the titles. I’ve been practicing keeping my hands high for the past four months. What will happen when I get hit? I don’t know. Technique is important but what counts is who wins this fight.

“I’m a warrior. I’m always going to go in there and try to destroy the enemy. That’s why I have 30 knockouts in 35 fights. I say I’ll control myself and think, but who knows?’’

No one, to be honest, not even Ponce De Leon himself, which is part of the problem.

“I know I’m lacking in technique,’’ Ponce De Leon added. “I know I’m a little short on defense. I’ve got a style where people think they can beat me. But when we’re in front of each other they see the monster who is in front of them and things change.’’

Perhaps so but three years ago Celestino Caballero didn’t see any such thing in an IBF title eliminator. Instead he saw an opponent as raw as an onion and he took advantage of his every flaw, easily winning a unanimous decision.

Ponce De Leon would love to avenge his only loss but he will have to wait for that because for now he must deal with young Lopez (21-0, 19 KO), an opponent who comes to the ring with much the same notion as Ponce De Leon’s. He comes ready to rumble.

That would seem to at least guarantee a concussive evening but it also means the champion, for a time at least, may be in as much danger as the challenger.

“I’ve seen him in the gym slipping punches, moving his head, countering off his jab and catching punches and hooking off that,’’ Gomez said. “I’ve seen him in sparring do everything a technical boxer is supposed to do. Then he gets tagged and I have no idea what he’s thinking. The warrior just comes out in him.’’

Fans love it when it does but only when it leads to temporary concussions for his opponent. When it instead leads to what it did in December, which was consistently getting popped in the nose by counter punches that stopped him in his tracks after he seemed to blindly run into them, calls into question all he has thus far accomplished.

That Ponce De Leon has one-punch knockout power is well established. That he has heart and an aggressive streak roughly as broad as the Grand Canyon is undeniable. But when will he master the art of boxing? When will he learn that slipping a punch to get into position makes his life easier and keeps Gomez’s blood pressure stable?

No one can answer those questions but Ponce De Leon and even he seems unsure of the

answers; yet the urgency of this moment has not been lost on him. He knows what is expected of him, required of him, really.

He knows he must do more than just win a fight Saturday night. He must look controlled and still savagely dangerous doing it, a balancing act that is not easy for someone with Ponce De Leon's natural instincts for war.

He knows what the future could hold for him if he can defeat the undefeated Lopez, who Gomez believes (and hopes) is likely to end up like one of Ponce De Leon's earlier battered challengers, Al Seeger. Fight like that and Ponce De Leon could create a demand for himself that not even the division's best fighters would be able to ignore much longer.

"The thing that made Ponce De Leon a world champion is he has what 90 per cent of the fighters don't have,'' Gomez said. "He's got a hell of a chin and he can bang. That's a lethal combination. That's what got him on this big show.

"You try to come forward and bang with him and I'll put my money on Ponce De Leon. I see this fight like the Al Seeger fight (an eighth round knockout in Ponce De Leon's third title defense). He was a good prospect and Ponce destroyed him. If he does that again, Ponce can put himself in position.

"Vazquez and Marquez (who have fought three straight bloody battles in which Vazquez has won the last two) have taken the spotlight in this weight class but if he fights to his capabilities Ponce could create a new opponent for one or both of them.

"Ponce has wanted to fight Vazquez for the longest time. We've been trying to make that fight for four years. I've talked to Frank Espinoza about it and he says, 'I'm no dummy. He's the wrong style.' He knows Israel would try to go toe-to-toe with Ponce and Ponce takes it better. Israel Vazquez is the right style for Ponce. He'd knock him out.''

If Daniel Ponce De Leon is to get the opportunity to prove Gomez is right, he must first prove he is more than just a swing-for-the-fences slugger Saturday night. Prove, to make it simple, that he can handle himself like a professional on a night when he everything is at stake.