Juan Manuel Lopez once described himself this way: “I go forward.’’ Unfortunately for Daniel Ponce De Leon, he is a young man of his word.

The 24-year-old Puerto Rican prospect turned instant champion for whom Top Rank promoter Bob Arum has great hopes more than fulfilled the trust Arum had in him last Saturday night when he destroyed the WBO junior featherweight champion in less than one round in Atlantic City, showing polish and power far in excess of what could have been expected from a 24-year-old baby-faced assassin. What he also showed is that he may become the next great pugilistic product of Puerto Rico, which is a proud boxing brand.

Ponce De Leon was making his seventh defense of the WBO title and was widely known to be a feared power puncher with verifiable defensive inadequacies but none that anyone had been able to exploit with any disastrous effects until Lopez came along. While the champion had been beaten once (decisioned by Celestino Caballero several years ago) he had never been down and was 34-1 with 30 knockouts going into his date with Lopez at Boardwalk Hall for a reason - he possesses what promoter Don King would call, “Double shock power!’’

Apparently so does Lopez, but he also comes armed with calmness and the kind of boxing skills that allowed him to weather an opening assault by the always attacking Ponce De Leon until he spied the opening he knew would eventually be there. When he did, Lopez landed a left handed and an explosive right hook and the fight was over. To be accurate, Lopez tottered to his feet and lasted as long as it took Lopez to land six more unanswered punches that drove Ponce halfway through the ropes and onto his back a second time, but from the moment Ponce De Leon first got hit, referee Michael Ortega knew what was coming - a rescue mission with him in the lead.

“My concern is he might be too green,’’ Top Rank matchmaker Bruce Trampler said before the fight began. “It’s a 60-40 fight for Juan. I think he can win but Ponce De Leon can really punch. He has a lot more experience.’’

While that was all true it didn’t matter, which is why Lopez (22-0, 20 KO) had his hand raised so quickly he barely had time to sweat. Now the ones who have to sweat are Trampler and Arum, who must continue to recognize that although Lopez is a young champion with great potential he is still green in a world that likes to eat its young.

Is he ready for someone like WBC champion Israel Vazquez or the savvy and savage former champion Rafael Marquez, who are the two best fighters at 122 pounds and clearly the most dangerous? After what he did to Ponce De Leon in 145 seconds it’s not so easy to say and it may not be the easiest thing in the world to keep him away from trying to prove because he is young, bold and, like every fighter, searching for the biggest paydays. Yet Arum must remember there is danger there, danger Lopez doesn’t yet need to be exposed to.

Even the kid himself showed some restraint not long after the WBO belt was strapped around his waist when he said in the ring through an interpreter, “We’re all surprised that we finished this early. I knew we were both hard punchers and I had to be careful. I just thought I had more (boxing) ability.’’

Clearly he did and already the drum is beating. Trampler has compared him to one of the greatest Puerto Rican fighters ever, Wilfredo Gomez. Others have tried to suggest he is the next Miguel Cotto, the junior welterweight and welterweight champion who comes from the same Puerto Rican town, Caguas.

The Kid compares himself to nobody and admits his idol is Felix Trinidad and that he knows little about Gomez except what people tell him. In other words, he’s a kid. But a kid with some kick behind him.

“We all thought he had tremendous talent but he didn’t have a lot of experience so you don’t know,’’ admitted Top Rank president Todd duBoef after Lopez’s night shift ended early. “We thought it was a 50-50 fight but Bruce said the kid’s a thoroughbred and you got to let the thoroughbred go.’’

Where he goes from here is to a string of fights on the East Coast, where Arum hopes to parlay Lopez’s pleasing style, pleasant smile and Puerto Rican heritage into stardom in the same way he did with Cotto. Between fighting his newest world champion in Puerto Rico, Atlantic City and New York, Arum believes he can create another Latino star in the model of Cotto and why not, if he can keep him away from Vazquez and Marquez for a while?

“There’s no reason to bring him to Las Vegas,’’ Arum said. “Keep him fighting on the East Coast. That’s where his base is. There’s a lot of Puerto Rican fans here. You fish where there’s fish.’’

There’s plenty of fish in the sea for a kid like Lopez, who has been fighting since he was 10 and winning most of the time. A five-time Puerto Rican national champion with a 126-24 amateur record, Lopez represented the island at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, four years after Cotto’s appearance in Sydney. Arum’s scouts discovered each of them on the Olympic stage, saw their potential and wasted little time capitalizing on it.

Now Cotto is on the edge of superstar status, which may come if he wipes out Antonio Margarito in July, and Lopez has broken through as the newest Puerto Rican star by breaking Ponce De Leon in half in a fight that required so little of him that Arum will very likely add him to a Aug. 31 pay-per-view show from Puerto Rico that headlines WBO light flyweight champion Ivan Calderon, another young star on the rise, against Hugo Cazares.

Who Arum matches him with is anyone’s guess at the moment, including his own, but aging former champion Gerry Penalosa seems a likely victim. Penalosa lost a controversial decision to Ponce De Leon last year and was hoping to land a rematch before Lopez’s right hand intervened. So why not use him as a measuring stick for young Lopez?

Penalosa has vast experience, just stopped Jhonny Gonzalez in a bit of an upset, boasts a solid 53-6-2 record with 36 knockouts and figures to be a test, but not too stiff a one for Lopez in the young kid's first title defense.

A bout like that would give Lopez badly needed experience against a 35-year-old guy from whom he can learn a thing or two without being likely to pay too high a price for the lessons. He would also further bolster Lopez's resume and buy Arum some time to perhaps hammer out a unification fight for later in the year.

Whatever happens, Juan Manuel Lopez seems sure to believe he can handle it.

"People talk to me about being the next great boxer from Puerto Rico,'' Lopez said. "Many people compare my style to Wilfredo Gomez. They say my power is something they rarely see at this weight. I think my style is not like any other boxer's.''

Daniel Ponce De Leon certainly wouldn't give him any argument about that.