Longtime Philadelphia boxing promoter J Russell Peltz was doing his best to hype Saturday night's pay-per-view matchup at the WaMu Theater between WBO super bantamweight champion Juan Manuel Lopez and Peltz's off-the-charts underdog of a challenger, Rogers Mtagwa.

"This might be the greatest fight New York has ever seen between a Puerto Rican and a Tanzanian," said Peltz, chuckling, fully aware that such matchups at any venue probably are as rare as full eclipses of the sun.

For the most part, the boxing media have resisted the urge to depict Lopez-Mtagwa as a downsized version of Ali-Frazier or Zale-Graziano. Lopez (26-0, 24 KOs) is too good, too polished, too devastating a puncher to be pestered much by the 30-year-old Mtagwa (26-12-2, 18 KOs), a former USBA bantamweight titlist who is ranked sixth by the IBF and 15th by the WBO. This is a discretionary defense for Lopez, a supposed breather against some African no-hoper, the equivalent of the Marines storming the beaches at Club Med and taking prisoner some bikini-ed vacationers.

But those who saw Mtagwa pull himself off the deck to win against Tomas Villa, or in other bouts in which the diminutive Tanzanian appeared to be walking a tightrope of disaster, only to survive and sometimes win, understand that upsets, even seemingly unimaginable ones, do occur. Somebody has to hit the Power Ball Lottery, right?

"I know Rogers has to be at least a 20-1 longshot, but he's going to be in there winging. That's all you can ask of a fighter," Peltz said of someone for whom he and manager Joe Parella clearly have more than just a working relationship.

"Rogers is one of those fighters you just have to root for," Peltz continued. "You hear people say this guy or that guy gives 110 percent. Rogers gives, like, 400 percent. He doesn't know any other way.

"Against Villa, in a fight he was already losing, Rogers goes down in the ninth round. I looked over at his corner and Joe is telling the referee (Rocky Burke), `If he gets hurt again, stop it.' Joe is almost like a father to Rogers. If Joe had stopped the fight then, nobody would have said a thing.

"The next round, Rogers floors Villa. I'm thinking, `OK, we get a 10-8, maybe make it a little closer.' Then Villa goes down again. Hmmm. Now we're looking at a 10-7. Could we really put this out? Then Villa goes down a third time. It's over."

Peltz said Mtagwa's come-from-behind victory was one of the most exciting rallies he has seen in 40 years of boxing promotion, a humdinger of a scrap that deserved consideration as 2008's best. But apparently not enough members of the Boxing Writers Association of America saw it,

which might explain why it wasn't one of the five finalists for BWAA Fight of the Year. For any fight or fighter to be considered legitimate, he or it has to be viewed by the requisite number of eyeballs.

The South Philadelphia-based Mtagwa occasionally has popped up on television screens across America, but generally in shows that drew Nielsen ratings similar to those for the Sushi Channel. He has a loyal if somewhat cult following in and around his adopted city, which is saying something when you consider that Philly fight fans are highly knowledgeable and apt to make their displeasure known when someone they have plucked down their good money to see gives something less than his best effort. Also, Mtagwa has no natural constituency on these shores; displaced Tanzanians comprise a tiny fraction of the Philadelphia population.

But everyone can relate to Rocky, right? Well, Rogers Mtagwa is as close as it gets to Sylvester Stallone's most famous fictional creation. The only differences are that Rocky is Italian, not Tanzanian, and is a heavyweight, not a 5'5" Smurf of a man. You can overlook ethnicity and size, though, if a fighter has a large enough heart and a refuse-to-lose attitude.

How Rogers Mtagwa, who came into this world in that fighting hotbed, Dodoma, Tanzania, came to ply his trade in Philly makes for an interesting story. He was one three Tanzanians – welterweight Mambea Bakari and heavyweight Mashacka Mululu were the others – who in 2000 came to a place they believed to be America's de facto capital of boxing for the opportunity to advance their careers.

"They wound up training at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center in South Philly," Peltz recalled. "Mululu got knocked out by John Flynn at the Spectrum. He had eye problems and went back to Africa a year or so later. Bakari had about 15 fights. He's still around, but hasn't fought in six or seven years."

It was Mtagwa who stuck, like lint on Velcro, slowly working his way into a tough fight town's collective consciousness. Sporting a 10-2 record in bouts in Africa, he made his U.S. debut on May 2, 2000, on a fight card Peltz promoted at a local brewhouse.

"I went to see Mtagwa in the gym the week he got here," Peltz said. "He looked like he could fight. He fought a southpaw Debind Thapa, who had an awkward style. Ten seconds into the first round, bam, Mtagwa is flat on his back. But he got up, fought a good fight and lost a decision."

Mtagwa, Peltz said, found himself "in a lot of hard fights, then Joe Parella took his career over sometime in 2002, after buying his contract from Melvin Thompson. What followed were more hard fights. Tough guys don't dance, and neither do brawlers with a willingness – indeed, eagerness -- to climb into the ring against high-caliber opponents

Peltz, a Temple University graduate and a season ticketholder for the school's home basketball games, frames Mtagwa's career in terms any Temple hoops fan can understand.

"Yeah, he's 26-12-2, but he's playing a John Chaney schedule," Peltz said of the retired

Temple coach, a member of the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame who was willing to take on any opponent, no matter how highly ranked. “I don’t think there would be many fighters around today who’d have a much better record fighting the guys Mtagwa has fought.

“He had Jose Reyes down twice, lost a split decision at the Spectrum. He fought the ex-(WBO super bantamweight) champ, Agapito Sanchez, lost a majority decision. He lost his USBA title to Martin Honorio, a split decision. Just a lot of hard fights, and the only guy who ever blew him out, Valdemir Pereira, did so two weeks after Mtagwa’s trainer, Monte Carter, passed away.

“The other fight he got stopped in, by Orlando Salido for the No. 1 spot in the world, he fractured a rib the week of the fighting, walking into the gym. He fell on the stairs. Joe and I never found out about it until afterward. He went through with the fight anyway because he didn’t think he’d get another shot.”

Peltz admits that keeping Mtagwa relatively safe and decently paid has been somewhat of a trying proposition.

“When I look at Mtagwa’s decision over Ricardo Medina, a guy who was, like, 31-33 at the time (actually, 31-33-5) in May at the Blue Horizon, I remember thinking there’s no such thing as a tuneup for him. The way he fights, anybody can give him a tough time for short money. On the other hand, he can give anybody good a tough time. Joe and I decided it might be best to wait until something really worthwhile came along.

“I would have been very disappointed if I hadn’t been able to get Mtagwa either a world title fight or a big payday because I would have felt I wasn’t doing my job. It’s tough to name a fighter who gives more of himself. Somebody like that deserves at least a chance.”

As if in answer to a prayer, not long after Mtagwa’s close call against the journeyman Medina, Peltz got a call from a longtime friend, Top Rank matchmaker Bruce Trampler.

“Bruce asked if Mtagwa might be available to fight Lopez,” Peltz said. “I said, `What kind of question is that? Of course we want the fight.’”

For his part, Mtagwa had no hesitancy in going along. The money was good – more than three times his highest previous purse – and, hey, a fight’s a fight.

“I don’t think Rogers knows the difference between Juan Manuel Lopez and Trini Lopez,” Peltz said, an arcane reference to the 1960s Latino singer who had a bit part in the 1966 war film, The Dirty Dozen. “When we came to New York in August for the press conference at Madison Square Garden, I said, `Rogers, do you even know who you’re fighting?’ He said no. Even though he was going to be fighting for the world title, he had no idea. Mtagwa doesn’t ask who, just when and where. For him, it’s all about lacing up the gloves and going to work.”

For the past several years Mtagwa has been trained by former middleweight contender Bobby “Boogaloo” Watts, who is best known as the first fighter ever to defeat Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Ask either man – and Mtagwa’s heavily accented English is difficult for any without a trained ear

to understand – about what strategy the Tanzanian is likely to employ against Lopez and you're likely to get the same answer. For Mtagwa, the only way to fight is to attack. No retreat. No surrender.

"I do know one thing," Peltz said. "Mtagwa has a better chance than all the so-called experts on the outside say he has. He'll be in there, fighting hard and giving it his all. Don't tell me he's undeserving of this opportunity. He earned his way here."