Juan Manuel Lopez won't get what he wants Saturday night at Madison Square Garden unless he gets a lot more than he's bargained for.

When the WBO junior featherweight champion headlines a pay-per-view show at Madison Square Garden arranged to showcase his skills, the 122-pound Puerto Rican champion is expected to all but decapitate poor Rogers Mtagwa. If he does, he'll be elated since that's the whole point of this exercise but he won't have gotten what he is searching for, although he may be closer to it.

Several time zones away, former WBC super bantamweight champion Israel Vazquez (43-4) will finally return to the ring himself after his long layoff following the bloody brawls with Rafael Marquez that probably took much of the fistic life out of both of them. The assumption is if he and the undefeated Lopez (26-0) both win there is but one logical opponent for both of them – the other (excluding Marquez again of course).

That is what Lopez dreams of and surely Vazquez would welcome. Vazquez wants it for another big payday. Lopez wants it to finally prove he is who he says he is.

"My skills have always been there but I don't get to use them,'' Lopez said frankly this week. "I have not had someone to push me. I know that better fighters will come along and they will make me fight.

"(Mtagwa) is a real tough guy and I know he can take a lot of punches. I don't think it's going to be an easy fight and I know it is going to be a long fight. There are older guys in boxing that have done a lot, but I know my abilities and I know what I can do and I know I can beat him. People think it will be easy because he has a lot of losses but I will have to work hard to get it.

"If a knockout comes it comes but I don't go in there looking for it. I just keep working. I would love a first round knockout and if it comes it will be an easy night, but that is not going to happen every night.

"I don't think I've been in trouble in any of my fights. I don't think I've been in any unnecessary wars yet. I like to give the fans a good show and I do the best that I can, but if there comes a time that I have to do something else to win, I will.''

That won't be Saturday night but it could be in a fight against Vazquez, who is rougher than a 100 mile detour. He comes to pressure his opponents and is willing to take whatever he must to give back even more. That would mesh well with Lopez's style if the two meet but if it's going to happen it will have to be in a hurry because Lopez isn't destined to fight much longer at 122 pounds and neither is Vazquez, although they would make an exception for each other.

"I started at 21 years old and have been fighting for five years at 122 pounds and now my body

is ready to go up,'' Lopez admitted. “I'd like to win four titles in four weight divisions, something no Puerto Rican has ever done. That is my goal. I feel like I will go to 126 sooner rather than later.

“As you may know I am doing this and maybe one more fight at 122 and then I am looking forward to going up to 126. (Co-feature headliner Yuriokas) Gamboa is a fight that has been mentioned and a fight that is out there and if it can be done, great. It is a great challenge for me and I think it is a great fight for both of us but I don’t think about that. I think about my next fight. Gamboa fight may happen but that is far down the road.''

That’s because of the spectre of a likely pay-per-view showdown with Vazquez first before the 24-year-old Lopez takes his leave of the super bantamweight division. Both still have to do their part and then come to some sort of an agreement but while he will be quite occupied himself Saturday night, Lopez will have a rooting interest in the successful return of Vazquez to boxing as well.

“Without a doubt I am going to be rooting for him to win,'' Lopez said of Vazquez. “I am going to win on the same night and I do look forward to fighting him in the future. I know there are a lot of good fights out there for me but, yes, that is one guy I would look forward to fighting if there is an opportunity to do so.''

It’s unlikely Mtagwa will stand in the way but with Vazquez one never knows because he has absorbed so much punishment it seems like he could fall apart at any moment. A man’s body can take only so much yet it seems Vazquez’s pain tolerance is far in excess of most of his contemporaries.

So it seems clear that if good business sense intervenes without being compromised by bad boxing, Juan Manuel Lopez will try once more to push his body to stay at 122 pounds before venturing off into the featherweight division and he’ll do it to meet the kind of guy who could make his life difficult.

“We take this one step at a time and we make sure everything is right and everything is correct as we move ahead,'' Lopez said, sounding wise beyond his years and surprisingly patient about his own future. “The opportunities are out there but we have to take them one step at a time. We can’t run to them.

“I know I am not a rookie any more but I am not at the elite level yet. I need a big fight that will put me at the elite level. I am working towards that. Just take my time and make it right and make it perfect.''

That is one reason he is headlining at Madison Square Garden’s WaMu Theatre. It is one more step by his promoter, Bob Arum, to create in him the kind of Puerto Rican fan base that was built first for Felix Trinidad and then for Miguel Cotto in New York. If that can be done, it gives Lopez power in the marketplace as well as in the ring, two places where leverage often determine the outcome of confrontation.

Lopez may be a young man in boxing circles but he has watched and learned from his idol and mentor, Trinidad, as well as from the growth of Cotto, who has appeared a half dozen times at the Garden as he grew into a popular welterweight phenomenon who will earn his biggest payday next month when he defends his WBO 147-pound title in Las Vegas against Manny Pacquiao. To create the same kind of aura around Lopez two things are required. He must win and he must perform spectacularly in the Garden.

"For any Puerto Rican, this is a big site, this is a big venue and this is where you want to be,'' Lopez said of Madison Square Garden. "This is where you want to showcase yourself like Miguel Cotto and Tito Trinidad. I talk to Tito almost every day and he tells how exciting it is to fight in the Garden. It is a very special place to fight.

"My idol is and always has been Tito Trinidad. He always tells me about the great experiences he has had at the Garden. I get excited when he talks about the fights he had there. That is why I am so excited to fight here and follow in his footsteps.

"It is very important for me to look great and to show everyone in New York, not only the Puerto Ricans but everyone that is there who comes to see our fights that I am a good fighter and I can do something special. I am looking forward to doing something very impressive because I want to go back to the big building. I want to fight in the big building (not just in the WaMu Theatre's smaller venue) and hopefully soon.

"We all want to be like Cotto fighting in the big arena at Madison Square Garden. That's what we all look forward to. That's what I look forward to. I have to work hard to get there, but don't doubt me, I will get there. I will have one of those great fights there.''