

NO LONGER JUST A FACE IN THE CROWD Juan Manuel Lopez Emerges As The Heir To Trinidad

By Joseph Santoliquito

Walking around in public in his native Puerto Rico, Juan Manuel Lopez used to get a lot of curious looks. He seemed familiar, but people couldn't exactly pinpoint who he was or where they'd seen him before. Some folks had a rough idea who he was, but few were bold enough to approach him and ask, "Hey, aren't you that fighter I just saw knock out someone? Could I take a picture with you."

Funny what a difference 12 months, six rounds, and 13 minutes and 1 second of fighting can do.

These days, the junior featherweight is so recognizable throughout Puerto Rico that he has to make special plans each time he steps out. Hour-long shopping sprees have morphed into three- and four-hour excursions. He can't move through a mall without being besieged by autograph-seekers and camera phones. His three-year-old son, Juan Manuel Jr., is even in demand, oftentimes grabbing the center of attention from his blushing, smiling father.

That's what happens when you carry lightning in your fists and you're arguably the best young fighter in the world. It's what happens when it seems your mere presence is powerful enough that the guy across the ring folds without putting up much of a fight. It's what happens when you're considered an icon-in-waiting.

Yes, many are starting to believe it is Lopez, not Miguel Cotto, who will replace Felix Trinidad in the hearts of Puerto Rican boxing fans. Can Lopez, like future Hall of Famer Trinidad, stop activity in Puerto Rico each time he fights, much like the way Manny Pacquiao shuts down the Philippines today?

Southpaw Lopez bulldozed his way through 2008, winning four times and needing only six rounds to do it—including three consecutive, first-round stoppages. His all-action style, and one-punch power, has swelled his fan base—and his home base. In late-December

The new home is tangible proof that Lopez has become a star, at least back home in Puerto Rico. His life made a dramatic turn when he stopped knockout artist Daniel Ponce De Leon in the first round last June, garnering a minor title. The rapid change has been almost beyond his comprehension.

World meet Juan Manuel Lopez. "Juanma," meet the world.

"This has all been a little shock to me," Lopez said through translator Ricardo Jimenez of Top Rank. "After I came back from beating De Leon, people were walking up to me wanting to take my picture. I've learned now every time I go out in public, I better be patient and not expect to get things done real quick."

Just before leaving for Las Vegas for his fight with Sergio Manuel Medina, on the undercard of the Manny Pacquiao-Oscar De La Hoya fight in early-December, Lopez began feeling eyes on him whenever he went out in public. A good example was a preflight trip to a shopping center. He was there with his family, including little Juan Manuel Jr., and as he walked in, he found himself talking to ... himself!

Lopez kept walking and talking, but soon discovered that there was nobody behind him. Where did his family go? He looked back and saw that they never got past the doorway of the shopping center. Fans had surrounded his wife, Barbara, and their son, wanting pictures with *them*.

“I found out there was a big story about my family in one of the local papers, and they had pictures of us in there, but I didn’t know that when we left that morning to go shopping for clothes,” Juanma said, laughing. “I knew there were fans out there who might have known me, but they knew my wife and kids too! Juan Manuel Jr. is always with me, and it’s come to a point where people want to take a picture with my son—and not with me. But we did buy clothes that day. It just took me a long time to do it.”

His meteoric rise has been eye-blink quick, though this upward curve hasn’t been without its divots and downslides. Lopez, 24-0 (22), had to absorb some valuable lessons during his ascension.

One that comes significantly to mind was Lopez’ 10th-round stoppage of Hugo Dianzo, on August 4, 2007, on the undercard of the Erik Morales-David Diaz fight at the Allstate Arena, in Rosemont, Illinois.

Lopez won, but looked sluggish doing it. Something, for some reason, didn’t look and feel quite right about him that night.

After each fight, Team Lopez gathers to discuss what happened in the ring. The meeting usually includes Peter Rivera, who co-promotes Lopez with Top Rank. Rivera was far from pleased with what he saw against Dianzo, and let Lopez know it.

“Peter really let him have it,” recalled Bruce Trampler, Top Rank’s matchmaker. “It was an agonizing, boring 10-round fight. Everyone was booing. It was a fight where one guy couldn’t hurt the other, and one fighter wouldn’t. All the rest of us were disgusted, and Juan Manuel realized that he had to work harder and step up the pace.

“What we’ve seen ever since then is the real Juanma. We knew there was talent there, it was just a matter of coming out, and it certainly has to come out more. But Juan Manuel was fighting at three-quarters speed. Some fighters tell you they don’t hear the cheers and the boos. Well, he heard the boos that night—and then some. Dianzo wasn’t his first stinker, but it probably will be his last.”

Rivera confronted Lopez about letting his fans, his family, and, most importantly, himself down.

“You have some fighters who run hot-and-cold, and Juanma was definitely running cold against Dianzo,” Rivera said. “It was part of his development that happened. We talked to Juanma and told him he has to be the same fighter all of the time. We stressed that if he didn’t make that change, we’d never get to the next level.”

Lopez had become intoxicated with his punching power. He was trying to knock out everyone he faced, and do it quickly. When those knockouts didn’t readily come within the first few rounds, he grew frustrated and lethargic. It forced him out of his rhythm and limited his considerable boxing skills. He resorted to throwing bombs, instead of breaking down his foes with his jab and wide array of punches.

It’s his well-rounded skill set that makes Lopez so special. Besides his charismatic disposition, his arsenal goes beyond a powerful right hook and bludgeoning straight left. He’s a technician too.

Rich Marotta, Fox Sports' ringside analyst, has seen Lopez fight five times, including his three-round demolition of Jonathan Ouendo in February '08, and one-round destruction of Cesar Figueroa in October.

"Juanma sets up opponents with boxing skills, and then hits them in such a fashion with clean, effective powerpunches that whoever he faces can't recover," Marotta said. "He's such a great finisher that any recovery efforts are almost impossible. I don't know anyone off hand who Lopez reminds me of, but maybe if you turned Salvador Sanchez around and made him left-handed, maybe him. I really think that much of Lopez that I put him on that level. He's a guy with real skills and a big-time punch. I think he is a very special fighter and the next superstar in boxing."

Defining Lopez, who's still a work in progress, will also depend on who Top Rank and Rivera puts in the ring with him. One thing is for certain: Team Lopez doesn't want to see any more fighters like Sergio Medina.

Medina, 33-2 (18), was supposed to battle Lopez, bring out a dimension in the undefeated sensation that we've yet to see. Instead, the fight turned into an embarrassing joke.

Lopez knocked down Medina three times before referee Joe Cortez mercifully stopped it at the 1:38 mark of the opening round. Medina didn't seem as if he wanted to fight. It was so easy, Juanma even shrugged after one of the knockdowns, baffled as to why this Argentine with the glistening record wasn't putting up any resistance.

"We were wondering the same thing," Trampler said. "All great fighters have to be defined by the opposition they face. But we don't need any more Sergio Medinas out there. It was a waste of our time and Juanma's time. We were looking for a guy to extend Lopez, let fans see him in a fight. Instead, we got that."

Back in the locker room afterward, it was vintage Lopez. The conscientious 25-year-old who parades with his emotions openly on display apologized to Trampler, Rivera, and Top Rank. He would have apologized to the whole of Puerto Rico if he had a bullhorn strong enough.

"I felt so bad for putting this together, I apologized to *him*," Trampler said. "The Medina fight wasn't what he trained for and what he expected. Lopez is not looking for handouts or stiff. He apologized and genuinely felt bad, but it wasn't his fault Medina didn't want to fight."

To make matters worse, the fiasco continued after the fight was over. Medina claimed that he received death threats forcing him to throw the fight, and that those threats were from "the organization and my rival."

The allegation struck Lopez harder than any weak attempt made by Medina inside the ring. Fortunately, Medina recanted his statements a week later and admitted he lied.

"When I got into the ring, Medina looked very confident to me and I thought I had to jump on him, I had to take that confidence from him," Lopez said. "Once I got him, I took all of his confidence away. I knew he was mine from that moment on. But what he said after, it was a lack of respect for me and anyone associated with boxing. Saying something like that wasn't true. He said he lied, and I knew I did my job."

What's out there for Lopez at 122 is anyone's guess. THE RING junior featherweight world champion Israel Vazquez and arch-rival Rafael Marquez would like to renew their incredible rivalry in 2009, that's if Vazquez' eye injury heals properly. There's also 5'11" junior feather praying mantis Celestino Caballero hovering around the top of the rankings.

"I hope to have a big year defending [the WBO belt]," Lopez said. "The fight I want, the fight I'm looking forward to is against Israel Vazquez, to unify titles. That's the most important to me, to prove that I'm the best."

After stopping Figueroa last October in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, Lopez was congratulated by Trinidad. The two hugged, then mugged for postfight pictures, but it almost appeared as if an informal ceremony was occurring.

"My idol has always been Tito Trinidad, and one day I'd like to be like him," Lopez said. "Trinidad told me he loves the way I knock out guys and that's the way he used to do it. I consider Tito a good friend. I carry myself just like Tito carries himself and how he is with the people and the fans. That's the way I want to be."