

UFC 85: Hughes Steps In, Up

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Nothing can be taken for granted in the precarious world of combat sports, and that applies to hall of fame fighters and the world's largest MMA promotion.

When the Ultimate Fighting Championship announced last February that UFC 85 at London's O2 Arena would be headlined by a Chuck Liddell-Mauricio Rua mega-match, Matt Hughes was enjoying a break from the Octagon, planning the final stages of his illustrious career.

But then things changed.

First Rua withdrew from the bout after rupturing the ACL in his left knee, and then a torn hamstring forced Liddell to cancel a reworked showdown with Rashad Evans six weeks before the scheduled event. Faced with a 20,000 capacity venue and a card devoid of a major attraction, the UFC sent out an SOS to Hughes, who dually answered the call.

"They needed me to fight. This is what I do, so of course I said yes," the two-time welterweight champion told Kevin Iole.

Hughes' appetite for fighting on June 7 was probably whetted when he was offered unheralded Brazilian Thiago Alves as an opponent. The Illinois native hopes Alves will be an adequate tune-up for a grudge match with Matt Serra later this year.

Hughes has conclusively defeated fighters that are vastly superior to Alves. BJ Penn, Georges St. Pierre, Frank Trigg and Sean Sherk have all been beaten by the two-time Division I All-American wrestler. But Hughes has appeared vulnerable in his last three outings, losing twice to St. Pierre and looking sluggish against Chris Lytle.

At 34 the once indomitable champion appears to be past his prime, and Alves should act as a barometer to gauge how far Hughes has slipped.

While Hughes' hunger may be waning, Alves has a voracious desire to complete his transition from penniless slugger to UFC superstar.

Equipped with \$50 and a rucksack, Alves left his hometown of Fortaleza at 19 and arrived in Florida to join the American Top Team. Given his Brazilian heritage, Alves was exposed to the finer points of MMA from a young age, but he was no fan of the famous Gracie Jiu Jitsu, instead favoring a more rugged style of fighting.

"I watched the Gracies growing up, but they fought Jiu Jitsu and I always thought those fighters were a little too cocky," recalls the 24-year-old. "Wanderlei Silva is my inspiration. I try to fight just like him. He's aggressive and always looks for the knockout. That's the way I love to fight."

It wasn't long before Alves' uncompromising approach to combat earned him the moniker

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“Pitbull”. His 20-4 record is highlighted by victories over Marcus Davis and Karo Parisyan, along with a 2006 loss to the unbeaten Jon Fitch. And while currently enjoying a five-fight winning streak, Alves has reason to be confident ahead of Saturday.

“[Hughes, 43-6] has been the man for so many years and has defended [the welterweight title] more than any other champ so I’m excited for this opportunity to fight him,” declares Alves. “I promised myself I will be world champion when I’m 25, now it’s only a matter of time.”

Hughes doesn’t have time on his side, but given Alves’ loss to wrestling specialist Fitch, the former champ reckons he has the style to stifle the relative neophyte.

“I’ll probably look to take him down, try to wear him out and get him a little slower because he’s got such quick punches, knees, and kicks,” predicts Hughes.

But isn’t there a saying about best-laid plans?

In the chief support bout popular British fighter Michael Bisping returns to the Octagon after a one round dismantling of Charles McCarthy on April 19. Just one day after that stirring middleweight debut, Bisping, 16-1, was offered a spot on the rapidly disintegrating UFC 85 card.

A face-off with his intended opponent, the brawling Chris Leben, would have been a crowd-pleasing clash, but legal issues forced Leben off the show, creating yet another headache for busy UFC matchmaker Joe Silva.

Bisping’s new foe, Jason Day, 17-5, made his UFC debut last April and promises to offer a different challenge for the Briton. Day was a late substitute in his fight with the noted striker Alan Belcher, but the Canadian impressed in his Octagon debut, negating his opponent’s stand-up skills on route to a first round stoppage.

While Bisping handled the now-retired McCarthy with ease, he will have a more challenging time with the well-versed submission specialist Day, who should provide a sterner test of Bisping’s stamina at 185 pounds.

Also on the 11 fight show, streaking former pro boxer Marcus Davis will close in on a welterweight title shot if he can overcome Mike Swick. The bout promises to be a frantic punch-out, with both men boasting impressive knockout ratios.

The power-punching Davis, 19-4, has won his last 11 outings in eye-catching fashion, while Swick had his win streak halted by Yushin Okami last year. Swick, 11-2, earned the nickname “Quick” after scoring four straight first round stoppages in the UFC, but the in-form Davis won’t be downed so easily in what looks like a “pick ’em” matchup.

Highly-regarded Nate Marquardt will continue his comeback after last July’s defeat by Anderson Silva when he faces grappling specialist Thales Leites. Some observers expected Marquardt to upset Silva, and the Wyoming native should be too seasoned for Leites.

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Rounding out the main card, Brandon Vera takes on Fabricio Werdum in a noteworthy heavyweight bout. Vera's only defeat came on points against Tim Sylvia last October and is still tipped by many to become a key player in the thin division. But the awkward Werdum has a habit of upsetting the odds having stopped Gabriel Gonzaga last January and lasting the distance with former champ Andrei Arlovski thirteen months ago.

Also on the card:

Jorge Rivera vs. Martin Kampmann

Matt Wiman vs. Thiago Tavares

Roan Carneiro vs. Kevin Burns

Luiz Cane vs. Jason Lambert

Paul Taylor vs. Jess Liaudin

Antoni Hardonk vs. Eddie Sanchez

Ed. note: Please head to our sister site, TheSavageScience.com, for more MMA material.