LONDON -- Entering UFC 85, Matt Hughes repetitively insisted that he was still in his fighting prime. But Thiago Alves didn't believe those words. And now nobody else will either.

A devastating knee strike saw Hughes suffer a second round knockout loss in front of 15,000 at London's O2 Arena. The defeat surely heralds the end of a stellar UFC Hall of Fame career.

But even in defeat Hughes still showed true professionalism. He wasn't supposed to appear on the UFC 85 card, but stepped in when Chuck Liddell pulled out. He also wasn't supposed to fight at 175 pounds, but agreed to the catch-weight bout when Alves came in four pounds over the welterweight limit.

"Alves is a good fighter. He got me tonight," admitted the former two-time welterweight champion.

At the onset, Hughes sought to use his wrestling skills and nullify Alves' noted striking skills, but the two-time Division I All-American wrestler failed with a couple of early takedown attempts. Hughes did eventually manage to bring the action to the ground, but he was unable to break through Alves' unyielding guard. The Brazilian regained his footing and reversed another Hughes takedown attempt at round's end.

"Alves was a bit bigger than I thought he was," said Hughes (43-7). "His takedown defence was good, as was his defence on the ground."

In the second, Hughes got caught by a knee to the chin as he looked for another takedown. He got back to his feet, but a slicing right knee from Alves drilled into Hughes' jaw, flooring the 34-year-old. A brief follow-up assault was enough to end the fight at 1:02 of the round.

"Physically I was in shape, I was ready to go five rounds," Hughes revealed. "But mentally I might not have been prepared for [Alves]."

"Matt is a legend in this sport. He's the greatest welterweight ever," added UFC President Dana White.

Alves, 24, can now look forward to a title challenge against the outstanding champion Georges St. Pierre.

"Thiago (21-4) is now definitely in the welterweight title mix," said White. "He looked big and strong, and he fought a good fight."

Said Alves: "When I started [fighting], Matt was slamming guys through the floor. It's a dream come through to beat Matt. Next step is the belt."

But Hughes doesn't want this fight to be the epitaph to his illustrious career.

"I've got one fight remaining on my [UFC] contract. If Dana and the UFC wants to reschedule my match with Matt Serra [who has a long-running verbal feud with Hughes], they'll do it. The fighter shouldn't decide what happens and who he fights."

In the co-main event, Britain's Michael Bisping delighted his hometown fans with a dominant first round stoppage of Jason Day. Bisping looked to strike with Day at the start of the middleweight contest and soon forced the Canadian onto the defensive.

Bisping (17-1) brought Day to the ground and fired in punches from range. The slippery Day (17-6) managed to escape to his feet but Bisping soon executed a swift double-leg takedown. The Manchester native then outmanoeuvred Day and positioned himself to unleash a series of punches that prompted Dan Miragliotta to stop the beating at 3:44.

"I've got more to my game now," said Bisping. "I'm doing what I want to do, which I couldn't do in my earlier performances."

Undercard:

In a welterweight showdown Mike Swick ended Marcus Davis' 11-fight winning streak in a contest that promised action but delivered below expectations. After exchanging strikes at the onset, Swick wrestled Davis to the canvas and spent the remainder of the round on top, but inside Davis' guard.

Swick's rangy kicks put Davis on defensive in the second and the Californian gained control of "The Irish Hand Grenade" on the ground, but was unable to land any clean blows. Davis had some success with some dirty boxing against the cage but Swick again managed to take Davis down.

The third round was dominated by clinches, much to the crowd's displeasure, yet Swick still maintained control when the action moved to the ground. Swick was deducted a point for holding the cage but he won the decision with all three judges scoring the bout 29-27.

Thales Leites out-pointed Nate Marquardt in an entertaining battle in which the complete ranges of MMA were on show. Leites (13-1) floored the American in the first round with a right hand, but soon after, Marquardt regained his footing and landed a barrage of uppercuts.

Early in the second Marquardt (29-8-1) caught Leites with a knee to the jaw when the Brazilian was still on the ground – an illegal strike under UFC rules that cost the American a point. The blow visibly hurt Leites, and after some recovery time he was back in the action, but Marquardt tripped him to the canvas and controlled the remainder of the round.

The third frame was fought mainly on the ground, with Marquardt deducted another point for what referee Herb Dean viewed as an illegal elbow to the back of Leites' head. The momentum swung for the rest of the round, with Leites claiming a slim victory by margins of 28-27 (twice)

and 27-28.

“I came to surprise him and fight standing up,” said Leites of the welterweight contest. “I feel I can fight in any situation.”

Fabricio Werdum edged toward a heavyweight title shot by forcing a stoppage over the highly-touted Brandon Vera. Werdum, looking to employ his vaunted ground game, took Vera down early in the first round, but the American managed to recover to his feet.

Yet Werdum (11-3-1) had greater success later in the round, tripping Vera (8-2) and securing the mount before unleashing a series of blows. Referee Dan Miragliotta wasted little time in halting the bout at 4:40, much to Vera’s anger.

“I was in a bad position, but I train for that” said Vera of the questionable stoppage. “I told the referee ‘I’m OK’. I’m not going to quit in a fight.”

Martin Kampmann returned to the octagon after a long-term knee injury to record an impressive submission victory over Jorge Rivera. “The Hitman” was in clinical form, taking down Rivera early and assuming control on the ground. Kampmann attempted a variety of submission holds before a guillotine choke forced Rivera to tap out at 2:44 of the first round.

“It was horrible [being out of action] for so long,” said Kampmann. “But it’s great being back.”

Texas native Matt Wiman (10-3) scored a stunning knockout over Thiago Tavares (17-2) in welterweight action. The first round was a back-and-forth affair, but Wiman’s accurate punching in the second round proved the difference. A flush right-hand sent Tavares crumpling to the canvas at 1:57 of the round.

“I saw that my punches were rocking him in the second round, so I just went as hard as I could,” explained a delighted Wiman.

UFC debutant Kevin Burns used a triangle choke to submit Brazil’s Roan Carneiro at 3:50 of round two in a welterweight contest. Carneiro was using his noted Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu to control the fight on the ground, but the Iowa native managed to slip on the triangle and force the surprise stoppage.

“I’ve been training 26 hours a week for this, and I’ve a full-time job as a banker,” said Burns after the victory. “I’m just really excited to be here.”

Light heavyweight Luiz Cane (9-1) used his punching skills to stop Jason Lambert (23-8), as a succession of hard southpaw left crosses forced referee Herb Deane to call a halt at 2:07 of the first round.

In the welterweight division, Paul Taylor (9-3-1) got back to winning ways, getting a split decision nod over fellow Briton Jess Liaudin (12-11). Taylor, who was coming off two consecutive defeats, used his superior striking skills to pull out the close victory by scores of

29-28 (twice) and 28-29.

Kickboxing specialist Antoni Hardonk (7-4) scored a stoppage over Eddie Sanchez (10-2) as the Dutchman's striking skills proved too much for the brave American, with the referee ending the heavyweight contest at 4:15 of the second round.