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DAKAR 2023 :

T3-T4: THE NEXT GENERATION IS IN PLACE

Key points:

- Lightweight buggies are split into two categories that will provide for two wide-open races between 31 December and 15 January: 46 T4 crews (in production SSVs) and 47 T3 crews (in lightweight prototypes) crews are expected to take the start from the Sea Camp in Saudi Arabia.
- Red Bull has changed the landscape with its strategy of fielding both the Red Bull Can-Am Factory Team — with reigning champion "Chaleco" López and Cristina Gutiérrez in T3 and W2RC champion Rokas Baciūška in T4— and Red Bull Off-Road Junior Team USA by BFG, with Seth Quintero, Austin Jones and Mitch Guthrie at the helm.
- The rising stars of rally raids know that these categories are the ideal place to hone their skills, which is why four 18-year-olds will be on the start line, eager to jump straight into the thick of it.

Everyone knows who the real talents are in both divisions of lightweight prototypes and SSVs, but few would dare to draw up a hierarchy before seeing them clash on the tracks. To make it even harder for the pundits, **Red Bull** has concentrated a staggering amount of firepower for this edition, with two teams and a total of six vehicles. The Austrian sponsor has turned to the maker Can-Am to prepare the lightweight prototypes that seem destined to propel its Dream Team to victory. It has mustered **Francisco "Chaleco" López**, who has won the category three times after reinventing himself as an SSV driver, as well as the young American **Seth Quintero**, who is dead set on continuing his progression after landing a record haul of 12 specials in the last edition, and the Spanish queen of sand, **Cristina Gutiérrez**, who claimed the World Cup in 2021 and finished third in the last Dakar. Also on the roster will be another fresh **Red Bull** recruit, **Austin Jones**, who is eager to shine in a T3 after securing the 2022 title in a T4, and **Mitch Guthrie**, charged with testing a new development model with a view to entering the race with a hybrid lightweight prototype in the near future.

A handful of podium contenders are eager to take the fight to **Red Bull's constellation of champions**, including **Guillaume De Mevius**, who will be racing for his own outfit after turning heads in his Dakar debut in 2022. Two former top bikers, **Antoine Meo** (fourth in 2018) and **Hélder Rodrigues** (third in 2011 and 2012), racing in a Zéphyr for **PH-Sport** and **South Racing Can-Am**, respectively, are counting on their killer instinct to carve a niche in their new category in no time, while two-time quad winner **Ignacio Casale** is back after two seasons at the wheel of a truck and could steal the show if **Yamaha** can deliver on its T3 ambitions.

The competition will be no less fierce among the production SSVs. **Red Bull's** sixth driver is none other than **Rokas Baciūška**, who posted the breakthrough performance of the last Dakar (third in T4) and has since taken the inaugural season of the W2RC. It is a new team, the same category for the Lithuanian, who will again cross swords with the Catalan **Gerard Farrés** (second in 2022), as well as the **Goczał** clan, which has found strength in numbers. Brothers **Michał** and **Marek** already won eight stages between them last January, so the debut of **Eryk**, the youngest rider in the Dakar, touted as an even faster driver than either his father or his uncle, has the potential to shift the balance of power. First-timers could also start with a bang in the T4 category, for example, with two former Argentinian quad riders, **Nicolás Cavigliasso** (2019 champion) and **Jeremías González** (third in 2018 and 2019). They are sure to come face to face with **Xavier de Soultrait**, who ended his career as a biker (seventh in 2019) and is embarking on a new adventure in a T4 Polaris fine-tuned by **Sébastien Loeb Racing**.

Racing in lightweight buggies is a springboard for drivers with pedigree who want to break into the elite, and never before have so many rising stars pounced on the opportunity. Indeed, there are 13 drivers under 28 on the T3 and T4 start lists, most of whom have already shown flashes of talent. Four of them will be 18 when the race starts: the baby of the field, the Pole **Eryk Goczał**; the Spaniard **Pau Navarro**, the author of impressive performances in the Rallye du Maroc (second) and Andalucía Rally (first); the Brazilian **Bruno Conti de Oliveira**, following in the footsteps of his father, who claimed a stage in 2022; and, finally, **Aliyyah Koloc**, who will have to do without her twin sister **Yasmeen**, still nursing an injured wrist, and will be racing in a T3 fielded by their father's **Buggyra** squad. It is worth noting that the two freshest categories in the rally also boast the largest female contingent: thirteen of these cars have women behind their wheels, four of them with 100% female crews on board. The ladies too are ready to fight for glory.

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PRESS CONTACT: pressedakar@aso.fr