

Riyadh, January 9<sup>th</sup> 2023

## WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP 2023 ADVANTAGE TO AL ATTIYAH, SUNDERLAND'S SUCCESSION IS OPEN

### Key points:

- **Nasser Al Attiyah** is on course on the Dakar to take a serious option out on his own succession thanks to a big lead over his runner-up during the 2022 season, **Sébastien Loeb**. However, the Frenchman, sitting in 2<sup>nd</sup> position of the championship classification on this first leg can, like last year, hope to stay in contact at the end of the race.
- In the T3 category, **Austin Jones** is in the same position as **Nasser Al Attiyah** for his debut in the category, pursued by his Red Bull clan team-mates. In the T4 category, **Rokas Baciūška** has reacted like a champion and arrives at the rest day in the lead. However, he will have to tackle the **Goczał** clan, which now includes three instead of just two pursuers. In the truck category, newcomer **Janus Van Kasteren** is challenging **Martin Macík**, while world champion **Kees Koolen** is some way back.
- In the bike category, following the premature exits of world champion **Sam Sunderland** and runner-up **Ricky Brabec**, the new generation of RallyGP riders' ambitions are on the rise. However, the pillars of the category are still there, with the top 8 within less than 8 minutes of each other.

### FORTUNE SMILES ON AL ATTIYAH

**Nasser Al Attiyah**, the reigning world champion, nicknamed lord of the desert since his fourth win on the Dakar, has become king of good luck. The Qatari has cultivated this oriental eye for safety, step by step, to the point of boasting a lead of nearly two hours over his nearest rival in the championship when totting up the scores in the locker room at the rest day. And guess who occupies this place? Yes, none other than **Sébastien Loeb**, his runner-up from last year! **Yazeed Al Rajhi** is currently tenth in the championship, far from his status as **Nasser's** lieutenant which saw him finish on the 2022 podium. Also, the new stars involved in season 2 have started the year badly, **Peterhansel** with an exit from the rally and his team-mates **Sainz** and **Ekström** with accumulation of considerable time losses, just like **Chicherit** in his Prodrive Hunter. However, there is everything left to play for in the championship between **Al Attiyah** and **Loeb**! Because the W2RC is based on the points awarded at the end of each leg and not on time differences, **Loeb** is still in the reckoning. It is the same scenario as last year at the same time, so history seems to be repeating itself. The Frenchman knows that if he retains his current second place in the W2RC until Dammam and picks up the maximum number of points per day, then he will be able to stay in contact with the Toyota Gazoo Racing driver in the classification, which is exactly what happened last year. The Bahrain Raid Xtreme clan probably have already had to get their calculators out. With 50 points for the winner of the Dakar and 40 for his pursuer in the championship, the 10-point difference can easily be filled by trying to obtain the best position as often as possible, something that the Qatari will also be well aware of. The first week's results are already evident to all: **Al Attiyah** has won 3 specials and finished second once, whereas **Loeb** has won 2 specials, picked up 2 second places and 1 fourth place. Virtually, on the verge of entering the Empty Quarter for the second half of the rally, the two opponents are separated by only one point in favour of the Qatari. Behind this "classico" that is in progress, **Martin Prokop** in his Ford, Hanwei Motorsports' Chinese driver **Wei Han** or also Century Racing's **Mathieu Serradori** have not messed up their entrance to the W2RC. Respectively in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> provisional positions in the W2RC, they weathered the first week's storms better than the stars.

### LIGHTWEIGHT PROTOTYPES: AUSTIN POWER

Following a switch from the T4 category this season to join the new 2023 Red Bull "dream team", **Austin Jones** has made a dramatic entry into the established T3 hierarchy. The American has managed to avoid mechanical problems and possesses a cushion that varies in thickness from one to almost three hours over his team-mates **Seth Quintero**, "**Chaleco**" **López** and **Cristina Gutiérrez**. As in the T1 category, the hunt for respectable places on the specials is now the strategy of his pursuers in order to limit the damage. In this game, his countryman in the Red Bull Off-Road Junior Team became a past-master last year. However, this year, it is the third American **Mitch Guthrie**, very far behind in the general rankings, who is the race's bounty hunter with three specials already in the bag. On tallying the scores in Dammam, **Guthrie Junior** could find himself not too far behind in the championship.

### SSV: BACIUŠKA LIKE A CHAMPION

**Rokas Baciūška** is the only representative of the Red Bull Can-Am Factory Racing taking part in the T4 category. The title holder in 2022, who, behind his metal rimmed spectacles, had got used to seeing double when it came to the **Goczał** brothers last year, is now seeing triple! With the debut of **Eryk, Marek's** son, the Polish clan have made the race a family affair. The Lithuanian has arrived in Riyadh in the provisional lead, but **Goczał** father and son are less than six minutes behind. South Racing Can-Am's **Rodrigo Luppi de Oliveira**, at one point leader of the race, is now in the hunter's position as well. Thanks to his good finishes on the specials, he can hope to remain in contact.

### TRUCKS: THE OTHER DUTCHMAN

**Martin Macík** must be fed up with coming up against Dutch rivals. It was **Kees Koolen** in 2022 who ended up depriving him of the title and this year it is **Janus Van Kasteren** on the first half of this edition of the Dakar! Indeed, the newcomer to the W2RC leads his opponents of season two in the general rankings. However, the Czech in his second-generation Iveco decked out in the colours of MM Technology has not had the last word and is only 47" from the bumper of the De Rooy Boss Machinery truck. The huge dunes of the Empty Quarter will no doubt be decisive for this titanic duel. As in the other categories, the points collected for respectable finishes on the specials should help to reduce the gaps. In this field, **Martin Macík** has already taken a lead on the scoreboard.

### RALLYGP BIKES: THE NEW GENERATION

By losing the reigning world champion and runner-up in back-to-back crashes, the 2023 W2RC is now looking for a new heir to the throne. On paper, **Van Beveren**, 3<sup>rd</sup> in the championship in 2022 and announced as the current man in form on his new Honda could lay a claim to this rank. However, it is the new generation of RallyGP riders who have seized the opportunity to challenge the established stars. **Mason Klein** was the sensation of the 44<sup>th</sup> Dakar and the 2022 season. With 9<sup>th</sup> place on the Dakar in 2022 and best rookie, last year the American became the first winner of the Rally2 world cup before making his debut the RallyGP category on this Dakar. BAS World KTM Racing's privateer rider is once again in the news for his second Dakar. At the age of 21 years, he won his first special on the Dakar and even took the lead in the general rankings for a day. This must have whet the appetites of the outsiders, because this first week of the Dakar witnessed the return to the top of **Daniel Sanders**, leader for two days, then **Skyler Howes**, the latest recruit of the Austrian team, in command for four days. Out of 8 stages, 7 were won by riders who had not yet tasted victory on the Dakar. This trend can also be seen in the provisional general rankings before tackling the second week of the first leg. **Skyler Howes** (Husqvarna Factory Racing) possesses a lead of only 13" over the winner of the Dakar in 2021 **Kevin Benavides** (Red Bull KTM Factory Racing), who is neck and neck with **Mason Klein**. Behind this tightly packed podium, two times Dakar winner **Toby Price** trails by less than 2 minutes. In 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> position, less than 3 minutes behind, lie the Monster Energy Honda clan and its two major assets, namely **Pablo Quintanilla**, 2<sup>nd</sup> on the last Dakar, and **Adrien Van Beveren**. **Daniel Sanders** (Red Bull GasGas Factory) and **Joan Barreda** (Monster JB team) are less than 8 minutes behind. The new generation that has shone during the first week have still not enjoyed a shift in the balance of power in the Dakar and the W2RC. The big hitters are still there, ready to rumble in the Empty Quarter where their experience could make the difference.

In the Rally2 category, there is also a search for a new heir. With **Mason Klein** having joined the ranks of the RallyGP stars, his place is now vacant. On paper, his runner-up **Romain Dumontier** and the riders who did not take part in the entirety of the 2022 season but who displayed some fine performances were all in the reckoning, starting with **Bradley Cox**. However, the BAS World KTM Racing rider left the race prematurely with an injury, as he led the category. **Michael Docherty**, an American living in the UAE, who had already made a name for himself by dominating the first stages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> leg in 2022, took over the lead, but a crash led to him slowing his pace. His team-mate at HT Rally Raid Husqvarna Racing **Romain Dumontier** has since dominated the category. Though regularly contested by **Paolo Lucci**, the other BAS World KTM Racing rider, who also experienced an off day, the Frenchman has retained the lead at the rest day, with an advantage over the Italian of 16'25". "Dudu's" countryman **Jean-Loup Lèpan**, riding for Nomade Racing, is on the bottom step of the provisional podium, trailing by 1:13'48".

In the quad category, the winner of the Dakar in 2021, **Manuel Andújar**, decided to attempt to conquer the title in the W2RC this season and he is dominating the provisional classification for the first leg, but only by one minute ahead of **Pablo Copetti** and a little less than one hour ahead of **Jurav Varga**. The latter two men have the experience of the 2022 season and have already proved that they will be ready to take advantage of the slightest slip-up by the Argentinean. **Laisvydas Kancius**, another regular in the category who was very active during the first week of the rally, suffered mechanical damage which placed him in 4<sup>th</sup> place, too far behind to hope to get back in the reckoning.

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