

Empty Quarter, January 12<sup>nd</sup> 2023

## DAKAR 2023: on a comeback mission

### FOCUS

The much-awaited day of the plunge into the Empty Quarter has arrived. After running along the border with the United Arab Emirates yesterday, today it was the turn of the Sultanate of Oman from where the riders, drivers and crews found themselves a stone's throw away on their way to the marathon camp, a bivouac without the assistance teams. In this immense desert expanse, the rally's competitors were offered 275 kilometres of special, with a wealth of dunes, naturally, but also gigantic chotts allowing the participants to try and hit the maximum authorised speed limits: 160 kmph for the bikes and 170 kmph for the cars. **Luciano Benavides** was comfortable on both types of terrain and clearly demonstrated that he is among the men to keep an eye on in his category, something that was already well known as regards the inexhaustible **Sébastien Loeb**.

### OUTLINE

Hazards, blunders and blows are so frequent in the rally-raid discipline that they make all predictions risky. This rule is as valid a month before the Dakar as it is just the day before and is still rightly on everybody's minds merely a few days before the finish. This is evident to see from the bike rankings, in which the leader again changed today, with **Kevin Benavides** having only occupied the summit of the hierarchy for a day. The winner in 2021 was dethroned by **Skylar Howes** but is still in the reckoning for the title, trailing by only 2'44", though his team-mate at KTM **Toby Price** is even better placed, with a slim gap of merely 28". This closeness in the race against the clock among the elite has especially whetted the appetite of **Luciano Benavides**, who trailed behind his rivals during the first week due to several lost minutes, but is showing himself to be the man in form at present. The Husqvarna rider gave a demonstration on the dunes of the Empty Quarter to become the first triple stage winner in the category this year and is beginning to get seriously close to the riders in front of him whose places are well within his reach. The little brother has well and truly grown up and is now in 6<sup>th</sup> place, hot on the heels of **Adrien Van Beveren**, who made the day's biggest losses and now has a gap of more than 15 minutes between himself and **Skylar Howes**, the other upwardly mobile official Husqvarna rider. **Luciano Benavides'** progress may be more likely to be successful, but it is less spectacular than **Sébastien Loeb's**. The Frenchman is inexorably closing in on the second place occupied by **Lucas Moraes**, though the Brazilian is jealously clinging on to his position and still has a nine-minute advantage in spite of the festival displayed by the man from Alsace currently taking top billing in Saudi Arabia. With victory on the first part of the marathon stage, **Sébastien Loeb** has obtained a fourth consecutive success on a special. Such a series has not been achieved previously in the elite of the car category since **Carlos Sainz** (2009), **Ari Vatanen** (5 stages in a row in 1989, then 4 in 1990) and **Jacky Ickx** (in 1982, 1983 and 1984). Admittedly, the WRC rally victory record holder claims not to be interested in statistics, but in this case such whittling away is eye-catching. It may not, however, be sufficient to put enough pressure on **Nasser Al Attiyah** to destabilise him, given that he sits on a cushion of one and a half hours and will be able to enjoy an untroubled night's sleep under the stars at the marathon bivouac. This will not be the case for **Guillaume de Mevius**, whose duel with **Austin Jones** at the summit of the T3 category came to an end after forty kilometres due to a mechanical problem that lost the Belgian one and a half hours. After triumphing in the T4 race last year, the American has a free rein to make his change of category a success. As the Can-Am team look to the future, they may well be breaking out in cold sweat in light of the 1-2-3 finish accomplished by the Yamahas on the day's stage (see performance of the day). In the T4 race, however, the match between world champion **Rokas Baciūška** and his 18-year-old challenger **Eryk Goczał** is in full swing. The advantage swung in the favour of Lithuania on stage 11, won by Rokas by a slim margin of 37", taking his lead in the general rankings to 4'17", but it is still all to play for in the SSV category. **Janus Van Kasteren** will also have difficulty controlling his lead in the truck category over the next few days, with an advantage of only 1'12" over **Martin van den Brink**, the winner of today's stage.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

Several days ago, **João Ferreira** gave Yamaha its very first stage victory on the Dakar, a fine performance for the brand-new prototype from the Iwata factory making its debut in the T3 category. Behind its rather mysterious codename, the YXZ1000R Turbo is powered by an engine derived from one of the brand's snowmobiles. In the Empty Quarter with its unending sea of dunes, what could be better than a "sand-mobile" to conquer them? Today, three representatives of the Yamaha clan put on a demonstration that thrilled all onlookers. The figures do not lie: just take a look at the gaps at the finishing line. **Ricardo Porem** picked up his first stage win on the Dakar ahead of **Ferreira** and **Ignacio Casale**, with the three men separated by only twenty-something seconds. More than six minutes behind them could be found none other than **Seth Quintero**, who gobbled up almost everything in his way last year, and **Austin Jones**, the new general rankings leader. This is no mean feat and says a lot about Yamaha's intentions in rally-raid. The Japanese factory may have finished with the bike category, but in the T3 class, there is still very much a story to be written.

### A CRUSHING BLOW

**Manuel Andújar** exited the Dakar in 2022 without having been able to defend his crown claimed the previous year in the quad race for his fourth participation on the Dakar. The Argentinean was forced out of the rally on stage 6

due to a crash that destroyed his quad. This year, he intended to regain the upper hand over **Alexandre Giroud**, who took advantage last year to take his title from him. However, his hopes were soon in a bad way on stage 3 when he conceded one hour to the Frenchman. By yesterday, the countryman of Lionel Messi had returned to third place in the general rankings but will not be repeating the score in football's world cup final against **Giroud**, the namesake of the French squad's goal scorer. This is the second premature exit in a row for the Argentinean in 6 consecutive participations. However, **Giroud** has still not yet defended his title. **Francisco Moreno Flores** is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the general rankings, admittedly more than an hour behind, but no doubt will be keen to make up for the misfortunes of Andújar, his countryman!

#### STAT OF THE DAY: 2

A breath of fresh air has been blowing over the Dakar in recent years with the arrival of many rookies, each as talented as the next. Whether **Seth Quintero** or **Mason Klein**, to name but two, all have made their mark. For this 45<sup>th</sup> edition of the greatest of rally-raids, there are even more of them: **Eryk Goczał**, **Lucas Moraes**, **Michael Docherty** and **Mitchel Van Den Brink** are just a few of them. Two of them especially attracted onlookers' attention today. **Eryk Goczał** is none other than the son of **Marek** and nephew of **Michał**, who together accumulated eight stage victories last year. His father passed down his passion for racing when **Eryk** was a mere whippersnapper. For his first participation, the newcomer in the **Goczał** clan only took two days to become the youngest stage winner on the Dakar. The young Polish driver has avoided any mistakes so far and on the evening of stage 11, he sits in second place in the general rankings, behind current T4 world champion **Rokas Baciūška**. In the car category, **Moraes** is not faint-hearted either. Following a third place on the Baja Aragon last year behind **Nasser Al Attiyah** and **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, he is taking part in his first Dakar with the sole objective of finishing in the top 10 of a special... The Brazilian, assisted by **Timo Gottschalk**, a former co-pilot of **Al Attiyah** among others, is doing much better because he has only missed out on the top 10 twice. On the podium for the first time on completion of stage ten, he also occupies second place in the general rankings. Admittedly, he lies more than 1 hour and 20 minutes behind **Al Attiyah**, but, with a high degree of consistency, he finds himself ahead of **Sébastien Loeb**, who has won five specials this year. Will **Goczał** and **Moraes** hold out until the end of the rally? Find out on Sunday!

#### W2RC: LOEB CAN DO IT

By winning four specials in a row, **Sébastien Loeb** has demonstrated, as if it was necessary, that the nine times winner of the WRC has the talent and especially the desire to conquer his tenth world title in 2023. Barring a stroke of bad luck, **Nasser Al Attiyah** should continue to cautiously hurtle down the slide-like dunes of the Empty Quarter until the finish to secure his 5<sup>th</sup> triumph on the Dakar. **Loeb** is adopting a different strategy, involving attacking every day to seek the 5 points on offer from the W2RC to the stage winner. In virtual terms, if the two rivals remain in their current positions of 1<sup>st</sup> (50 points) and 2<sup>nd</sup> (40 points) in the classification for the first leg, when counting their points to help themselves get to sleep at the marathon bivouac, **Sébastien Loeb** will only have 3 less than his rival thanks to his performances on the specials. With 3 stages left to race, the Bahrain Raid Xtreme driver can let himself dream tonight. He could even take the stars out of the sky and leave the Dakar with more points in the championship than the winner of this leg, which would indeed be a first.

#### THE MAKINGS OF A CLASSIC

**Frédéric** and **Magali Barlerin** had several objectives when signing up this year for their first Dakar Classic. For the biker who tried his luck without success in 2019 before completing the rally in 2021, in the unassisted biker category if you please, but with the support of his wife each day, the aim was to enjoy the race as a couple. For their Strakit buggy which took part only once in the Paris-Dakar in 1982 without finishing, the aim was to rid this monkey from its back 40 years later. On the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the Paris-Dakar, this buggy with its Peugeot engine did not get past the rest day in Gao. Like this year, the rally included 14 stages and the end of the first week concluded after 8 of them. Yesterday, at the marathon bivouac in Haradh reserved for participants in the Dakar Classic, the **Barlerins** had managed to take the oldest of the historical vehicles in the 2023 caravan beyond the rest day, which was an initial relief, but the couple are not counting their chickens before they've hatched just yet...

#### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Luciano Benavides**: "If I've won my third stage it will be incredible"

*"Today was another really fast day. I enjoyed it a lot in the Empty Quarter. I like this kind of stage. I pushed all day long in the dunes. I feels like motocross, so I like it a lot. It was a really fun day and I think I got a good result as well. I don't know if I won, but I think for sure that I'm in the top 3. It was hard to read the tracks, but of course I wasn't in the starting position, so I had plenty of lines in front. You always need to be really careful with the holes, because there were many holes in the sand. I missed a few and nothing happened, I didn't crash. Luckily, there are no issues with the bike. I was trying to take care of it and not crash, no big impacts for the wheels and for the rest, so it looks like everything is ok for tomorrow. I think it wasn't ideal to win today, but if I have, I feel really confident with my navigation, like I did yesterday opening all the stage, so if I have to do that, then of course I'm happy to be here and if I've won my third stage it will be incredible".*

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