

Al-Hofuf, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2023

## Dakar 2023 — Stage 13 ONE FOR THE HISTORY BOOKS

### FOCUS

To pay tribute to the Empty Quarter and bid it a dignified farewell, the penultimate special was held to the south of Shaybah, in a vast and beautiful expanse of sand with chains of dunes as far as the eye can see. **Kevin Benavides** leveraged his flair and adaptability to drag himself back into contention for the title in this final dune-surfing test, mixed with a return to gravel tracks at the end of the course, which set the stage for the most evenly matched dash to the line in Dakar history. **Sébastien Loeb**, on the other hand, will have to settle for second overall despite showing his well-rounded skills with a whitewash of specials in the Empty Quarter, where he also smashed a record held by **Ari Vatanen** since 1989. Not bad.

### OUTLINE

Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, Agatha Christie and Quentin Tarantino would have had to brainstorm together to whip up a script as full of suspense as the one that played out near Shaybah on the eve of the Dakar finale. The authors, **Kevin Benavides** and **Toby Price**, had little concern for strategies or calculations, resorting to the brute force of their arms, the wags and wiggles needed to surf the dunes... and pulling the throttle to the stop whenever possible. On the way to his seventh career stage win (see *Performance of the day*), the biker from Salta slammed on the brakes when he saw his teammate **Matthias Walkner** had suffered an accident, but he got back in pursuit of his other KTM stablemate, **Toby Price**, who now finds himself teetering on the edge between victory and defeat with 136 kilometres to go. After the stage to Al-Hofuf, the race is tighter than ever before, with the Australian at the top of the general standings by a razor-thin margin of 12 seconds over **Kevin Benavides**. After roughly 3,900 kilometres of racing, this gap amounts to barely 300 metres, a distance that both riders will be watching closely in tomorrow's finale on the road to Dammam. While **Skyler Howes** has been a cut below the Australian and the Argentinian, it would be unwise to write him off, even though his deficit of a minute and a half to **Price** will be very hard to erase, not least because the exceptional starting order of the final special, in the reverse order of the general classification, means the American will be "flying blind" with **Benavides** and **Price** hot on his heels. They will be hard to shake off!

It is a completely different story for **Nasser Al Attiyah**, who had the satisfaction of feeling the sweet breeze of his home country while travelling down the road section a few kilometres from the Qatari border before reaching Al-Hofuf. The scent of a fifth title is also getting stronger for the Toyota driver, even as a **Sébastien Loeb** firing on all cylinders rewrites the record books 1 h 21 away from what could have been his maiden win. The French driver was not content to secure his second place ahead of the super-rookie **Lucas Moraes** (see *Figure of the day*), but also gave himself the pleasure of beating one of **Ari Vatanen's** records. Loeb is the first car driver to take six stages in a row, for a total of seven in this Dakar (mirroring **Sainz's** exploit from 2011) and 23 since he first started the Dakar in 2016. In T3, **Mitch Guthrie**, just like **Loeb**, added another stage win to his tally (five this year, seven in total), but **Austin Jones** remained in a league of his own with 50 minutes to spare over **Seth Quintero**. **Alexandre Giroud** also remains undaunted despite **Marcelo Medeiros's** four consecutive victories. In T4, the baby of the Dakar, **Eryk Goczał**, picked up his fourth triumph and moved within 3'24" of Rokas Baciūška, who has held up well under the pressure of leading the race since stage 7. Meanwhile, Janus van Kasteren can rest easy when looking at today's classification. **Martin van den Brink** (see *A crushing blow*) spiralled out of contention, leaving **Martin Macík** as **Van Kasteren's** closest pursuer, 1 h 16 back.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

**Toby Price** led the standings by 28 seconds over **Skyler Howes** and 2'40" over **Kevin Benavides** this morning. By the finish of the special, which he reached long after his opponents, the Argentinian had managed to take the triumph despite spending 23'10" with Matthias Walkner, his teammate and winner of the 2018 Dakar, who exited the Dakar in a helicopter. The elder **Benavides** banished the spectres that often plague champions after such an inauspicious event and went on to win the special after the

time spent with **Walkner** was deducted. He relegated his brother, **Luciano**, who had been originally named the winner before receiving a one-minute penalty for speeding that cost him his fourth success in this Dakar. The 2021 Dakar champion is only 12 seconds behind the Australian with one stage to go, something that has never happened before in the Dakar! At this stage of the race in 2014, **Peterhansel** led **Roma** by a comparatively comfortable 26 seconds. The previous record in the motorbike category had been set not too long ago. In 2019, **Pablo Quintanilla** started 1'02" behind... **Toby Price** himself. The Australian romped to victory in Lima, taking his second title after his success in 2016. To add injury to insult, the Chilean, riding a Husqvarna, ended up sore after he pancaked into the ground from a dune jump. Barring team orders in the Austrian clan, a 153 km sprint will unfold tomorrow, perhaps leading to the narrowest margin of victory in the history of the Dakar!

### A CRUSHING BLOW

When a crew loses the Dakar due to a simple navigation blunder or driving error, it can only blame itself and hope to do better next year, but when it is the machine that gives up the ghost... it is enough to drive a person mad. This is exactly what happened to **Martin Van Den Brink** today. Starting the special over half an hour behind **Janus van Kasteren** in the general standings, **Van den Brink** still held out hope of standing on the top step of the podium in Dammam, but it all went up in smoke when mechanical disaster struck in stage 13, on the eve of the finish. The Dutchman had to stop to get his hands dirty about 50 kilometres into the special. Every passing minute was another nail in the coffin of his prospects of finishing the Dakar as the runner-up, as **Martin Macík**, who has also had his fair share of bad luck in this Dakar, seized the opportunity to move up to second place. When people say the Dakar is unforgiving...

### FIGURE OF THE DAY: 3

It would have taken a brave person to bet on **Lucas Moraes** finishing on the overall podium on the evening of stage 6, when he moved up to third place after surviving the carnage that condemned **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Carlos Sainz** and **Yazeed Al Rajhi** that day. Yet the Brazilian rookie kept a cool head, staying calmer than **Henk Lategan**, who was still ahead of him at this stage, and not losing his nerve even when **Sébastien Loeb** started nipping at his heels. Granted, the youngest winner of the Rally dos Sertões, the gold standard of off-road racing in Brazil, gave up his position as runner-up to **Nasser Al Attiyah** in the face of the onslaught of the nine-time world rally champion and his Hunter, but with one day of racing left, he still has a comfortable and flattering margin of 55 minutes over **Giniel de Villiers** in the fight for the bottom step of the podium. The last rookie who finished in the top 3 was the 1988 champion, **Juha Kankkunen**, who repeated the exploit of another illustrious Finn, **Ari Vatanen**, who had burst onto the stage in triumph in 1987. **Lucas Moraes's** performance also raises the bar for Brazilians in the top-flight car category: while **Leandro Torres** and **Reinaldo Varela** had won the SSV race in 2017 and 2018, respectively, **Klever Kolberg** was until now the top-ranked Brazilian driver, with eighth place in 2022. *Recorde batido.*

### W2RC: STALEMATE

Barring a dramatic turn of events, **Nasser Al Attiyah** has got the first round of the season in the bag, and with it, 50 points to **Sébastien Loeb's** 40. However, his cautious approach has cleared the way for his runner-up, who broke the record for the most consecutive stage wins today, to snap up valuable points on a daily basis. The Qatari may have finished second on the day, right behind the Frenchman, but on the eve of the finish, the two returning lead actors of season 2 are virtually tied on points in the championship! As a reminder, last year, the epilogue of the Dakar saw **Nasser** leave Jeddah with an advantage of a single point despite his victory in the race. If the two champions make it to the finish tomorrow, the championship will be wide open. Season 2 is about to start again with a vengeance in the car category! Among the motorbikes, the gaps on the current podium favour the two KTM factory riders, **Price** and **Benavides**, and Husqvarna's **Skylar Howes**, none of whom stood on the final podium in 2022. The two brands could also land a big haul of points to the detriment of the reigning world constructor champion. Honda, represented by **Van Beveren** and **Quintanilla** in fourth and fifth place, respectively, is unlikely to finish in the same solid position as last year.

### THE MAKINGS OF A CLASSIC

The third edition of the Dakar Classic came to an end today, as the caravan will take a road section to the Arabian Gulf tomorrow. This evening, **Juan Morera** and **Lidia Ruba** can celebrate becoming the first crew to almost whitewash the entire race in its young history. The Spanish couple has held the overall lead since stage 2, leaving only the scraps of stage 1 to another returning crew, the **Galpins** in their Protruck. Their friends **Carlos Santaolalla** and **Aran Sol i Juanola** follow them in the standings,

ahead of the Italians **Paolo Bedeschi** and **Daniele Bottallo**. The 2022 champions, **Serge Mogno** and **Florent Drulhon**, fifth overall, shone by winning the Challenge Dune Test, which for the first time rewarded the top performances on the chains of dunes. In the Authentic Codriver Challenge, a crew that started with all the modern instruments on board made the best of a bad job. Since their tech simply refused to work, they signed up for the challenge from the age of pencil and paper and came out on top! In the long-awaited Iconic Classic Challenge, reserved for individual vehicles that have already taken part in the Dakar, another Toyota HDJ 80 claimed the title. Indeed, every single 2023 champion was racing in an "80". The Catalans in second place overall drove one that had taken part in the 1994 and 1996 editions, which won the Iconic Classic Challenge here. In one of those tales that delight the Historic, this vehicle used to belong to **Jacky Ickx**, who planned to race the Dakar in it. Alas, it was not to be, but the story comes full circle in this edition, as the Belgian driver, who has spent the whole fortnight serving as the ambassador of the race, has finally seen "his" car dash to victory in this challenge in the Dakar Classic!

#### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Adrien Van Beveren: "It's my best Dakar"**

*"Today was not easy, a lot of broken dunes. At the beginning, I pushed really hard, but I jumped two or three dunes and got a little bit tense. I was scared to miss a drop, so I ended up riding safe. Fast, but safer. I tried to reach the finish and push as much as possible. We have no regrets. Still one day to push. It's my best Dakar, I think I'm doing good and happy with my performance."*

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