

Paris, December 19th 2023

## CHALLENGER/SSV RACE: THE FUTURE IS NOW

### Key points:

- *The two categories of lightweight vehicles that provide a launch pad for budding talents to burst onto the rally-raid scene, as well as requiring a more modest investment than state-of-the-art cars, have been renamed. The FIA has renamed Group T3 —the fastest of these vehicles— to Challenger and Group T4 —production vehicles with very slight modifications— to SSV.*
- *In the Dakar, the reigning champion, Austin Jones, and the Can-Am Factory Team drivers will have to play Whac-A-Pole with the Goczał clan and their Taurus machines. The young Eryk is spearheading the family contingent after switching from SSV to Challenger.*
- *Among the SSVs, Can-Am Factory Team are counting on the Portuguese driver João Ferreira to secure the title in a potential rematch with Sara Price, the breakthrough performer of the season, who is ready for her Dakar debut after shining on the Moroccan tracks a few weeks ago.*

As hoped for or, rather, as expected, lightweight vehicles turned out to be really good at churning out one rally-raid talent after another and fuelling the rise of phenomenal rookies shooting for the stars. For example, a quick glance at the Ultimate start list reveals that, among the Toyota Hilux drivers in the race for top honours, **Seth Quintero** and **Guillaume de Mevius** used T3s as a springboard, much like **Pau Navarro** learned the ropes in a T4 before getting his hands on an X-raid Mini. Their promotions did not leave a power vacuum in these two categories —far from that. If the last Dakar is anything to go by, there will be a glut of title contenders in the Challenger category. The American reigning champion, **Austin Jones**, who won his duel with **De Mevius** by technical KO, had already claimed the T4 title in 2022. The author of a rock-solid performance in his first year at the higher level is now returning as a hot favourite.

However, the W2RC season has since witnessed the emergence of a host of rivals, some of which are behind the wheel of a machine that poses a particular threat to the Can-Am Mavericks that dominated the scene in recent years. Granted, the American will be sharing leadership duties in Can-Am Factory Team with the Chilean "**Chaleco**" **López**, a lean, mean winning machine since he swapped a handlebar for a steering wheel, as well as the Lithuanian **Rokas Baciūška**, a two-time SSV world champion (2022 and 2023) before his promotion to Challenger. In the opposite camp, a horde of Taurus T3 Max cars is gearing up for an offensive: the entire **Goczał** family is also moving up from SSVs to Challenger, including **Eryk**, who won the Dakar at the tender age of 18 after a tumultuous finale. Together with his father **Marek** (third in 2022) and his uncle **Michał** (fourth in 2021), the Pole leads a triple menace. The Spaniard **Cristina Gutiérrez** (third in 2022 and fourth in 2023) is also jumping behind the wheel of a Taurus with her sights set on the title, as is **Mitch Guthrie**, who knows this vehicle like the back of his hand after developing its original version. Last but not least, **Ignacio Casale**, a three-time winner of the quad race (2014, 2018 and 2020), will also try to put his XYZ Yamaha in contention for a podium spot.

Although quite a few movers and shakers have been promoted to Challenger, the SSV race looks set to be fiercely contested, with a different roster of brands in play. Can-Am remain the top favourites after signing **João Ferreira** and **Gerard Farrés**, a safe pair of hands (second in 2019 and 2022), for their works team. While the young Portuguese driver's overall performance was nothing to write home about (37th in the T3 ranking), he did pick up a stage win in his only previous Dakar start and went on to claim the Rallye du Maroc in the SSV category. His main rival in the last round of the W2RC was **Sara Price**, a fellow Maverick driver who claimed two stages. The American, who secured her ticket to the rally with her triumph in the Sonora Rally Road to Dakar, gets frequent tips from her countryman —and partner—

**Ricky Brabec.** However, it remains to be seen if this will be enough to keep the Polaris RZR PRO R at bay. The pioneering maker in the XS segment will be banking on Xtreme Plus's Japanese driver, **Shinsuke Umeda** (second in the 2023 W2RC), and Sébastien Loeb Racing's two former bikers, **Florent Vayssade** and **Xavier de Soultrait**.

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