

Paris, December 28th 2023

## MOTORBIKE RACE: RED TIDE RISING

### Key points:

- *The start list contains the names of the 140 riders who will tackle the 46<sup>th</sup> Dakar on two wheels, exploring Saudi Arabia from AlUla to Yanbu between 5 and 19 January. The defending champion, Kevin Benavides, is still on the mend after succumbing to multiple injuries this season, but his brother Luciano, the reigning W2RC champion, will be leading the charge for the wider KTM constellation through its subsidiary Husqvarna.*
- *However, their rivals at Honda have an even deeper roster. The two signings of this season, Skyler Howes and Tosha Schareina, are but two of the six red riders with a real shot at the top step of the podium.*
- *Hero, with Joan Barreda joining Ross Branch, and Sherco, once again with Lorenzo Santolino as its designated leader, are also forces to be reckoned with.*

The clockwork orange has sand in its gears! After securing a one-two finish in the last Dakar, with **Kevin Benavides** clinching the trophy by just 43 seconds over **Toby Price**, the factory KTM riders were unable to carry over this form to the rest of the season. The two-time champion (2021 and 2023) from Argentina broke his femur just before the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge, fractured his wrist shortly after returning to training for the Desafío Ruta 40 and recently hurt his leg again in the run-up to the 2024 edition. **Toby Price** showed remarkable consistency throughout the W2RC season, capping it with victory in the Rallye du Maroc, only to come up four points short of the title at the end of the championship. The man from Oz is still at the helm of the Austrian squad, which lost its standard-bearer, **Matthias Walkner**, to a multiple leg fracture in early December.

Another star, though, is burning with the light of a thousand suns in the wider KTM constellation: **Luciano Benavides**, enrolled in the Swedish-born subsidiary Husqvarna, will be sporting race number 1 in the Dakar. The man of the year, who started the season with a hat-trick of stage wins in the last Dakar, became the world champion after finishing second in every other round. This success makes him one of the hot favourites to take the rally despite not having finished in the top 5 before. The Spanish division is also bringing its firepower to bear, with GasGas again fielding **Daniel Sanders**, who opened his rally raid account in the Sonora Rally, as well as the two-time winner **Sam Sunderland**, who will be out to settle the score after withdrawing from one race after another in 2023.

In the opposing camp, Monster Energy Honda Team is brimming with confidence after taking its second back-to-back W2RC manufacturers' title and rolling out the latest version of its CRF 450 Rally in the Moroccan finale. The management of the reds has landed a few nice catches in this year's transfer market. After bringing **Adrien Van Beveren** on board in 2022, the Japanese maker has signed the American **Skyler Howes**, third in the 2023 Dakar, and the Spanish young gun **Tosha Schareina**, the runner-up in the Sonora Rally and later winner of the Desafío Ruta 40. Honda have also got other aces up their sleeve: **Ricky Brabec** already tasted glory in 2020, while **Pablo Quintanilla** has cracked the top 5 six times (including the second spot in 2020 and 2022) and his compatriot **Nacho Cornejo** scored a near-miss in 2021. The team has a shot at victory with each of its six riders. However, they will also have to contend with the Indian maker Hero, where **Ross Branch**, never far from the top spots this season, has been joined by **Joan Barreda**, who has his sights set on his 30<sup>th</sup> career stage win and perhaps even loftier goals. Other candidates for the places of honour include the Sherco riders, chief among them **Lorenzo Santolino**, who is bound and determined to improve on his sixth place overall from 2021.

One step below the big guns, the Rally2 riders are also in the mix for the top 10. For example, the 2023 winner, **Romain Dumontier**, who came in fourteenth in Saudi Arabia and dominated the W2RC season to take the title in the category. He will have to keep an eye on his main rivals for the championship, from the Italian **Paolo Lucci** and the Frenchman **Jean-Loup Lèpan** to the South African **Bradley Cox**. The advent of the Kove motorbikes could also shake up the ranking. The Chinese maker is pinning its hopes on two Chinese riders, **Sunier Sunier** and **Fang Xiangliang**, as well as the Frenchmen **Neels Theric** (eighteenth in 2023) and **Xavier Flick** (thirty-second in 2021). Mason Klein, a former category champion who moved up to RallyGP last year but failed to make an impression among the leading constructors, is also returning on a Kove, albeit with his own structure.

### Original by Motul: the bravest of the brave

One small village of indomitable hard men still holds out without assistance. In the heart of the bivouac, there is a section where riders arrive in dribs and drabs, remaining open well into the night for the bikers touted as the bravest in the Dakar. This year, 27 adventurers have signed up for the race without assistance, a challenge that involves taking care of maintaining and repairing their motorbikes on their own. These gluttons for punishment face long days and long nights, keeping the flame of mutual support burning in the Dakar. The tracks and dunes set the scene for a competition in which former winners and the movers and shakers of previous editions will no longer appear in the standings. Among the candidates for the trophy are the Belgian **Jérôme Martiny**, who has come close to the top 30 on two separate occasions and is looking for a fresh challenge without assistance, as well as the Slovenian **Simon Marčič**, who will be tackling his tenth Dakar as a grizzled veteran, and the Czech **David Pabiška**, racing in his fifteenth start (thirty-sixth in 2023). All eyes will also be on two first-timers who have shown real flashes of talent before their baptism by fire, perhaps because of their family legacies: the Austrian **Tobias Ebster**, the nephew of the former champion **Heinz Kinigardner**, and the Italian **Gioele Meoni**, the son of the two-time winner **Fabrizio Meoni**.

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**PRESS CONTACT:** [pressedakar@aso.fr](mailto:pressedakar@aso.fr)