

Riyadh, January 13<sup>th</sup> 2024

## 2024 DAKAR: AFTER THE EMPTY QUARTER

### Key points:

- *After six stages and a total of eight days of racing, including the prologue in AIUla, the 46th edition of the Dakar has been a roller-coaster of breakthrough performances, vindications, debacles, plot twists, comebacks and surprises on the tracks and dunes of Saudi Arabia. The culmination of the first week, the brand-new 48H Chrono concept, scattered drivers and co-drivers across the Empty Quarter and delivered on its promise: nearly every category saw a change in leadership as the field emerged from the dunes, just before the rest day in Riyadh.*
- *Exactly at the midpoint, with another 2,384 kilometres of specials on equally diverse terrains ahead, the big kahunas will now get to grips with the return trip in their bids to claim victory in Yanbu: Ricky Brabec and his Honda teammates have laid down a marker; Carlos Sainz and Mattias Ekström's Audis are calling the shots ahead of Sébastien Loeb; Eryk Goczał is trouncing the opposition in the Challenger class; Yasir Seidan's dominance in SSV race is softening the blow of Yazeed Al Rajhi's exit for the Saudi fans; and Martin Macík rolled into the capital as the king of the juggernauts.*
- *All in all, 291 out of the 330 vehicles at the start have completed the first half of the rally, including 111 motorbikes (out of 122), 8 quads (out of 10) for the FIM entrants; and 59 Ultimate cars (out of 70), 40 Challenger cars (out of 42), 30 SSVs (out of 36), 3 Stock cars (out of 3) and 40 trucks (out of 47).*
- *The Spaniard Carlos Santaolalla continues to deliver a masterclass in the Dakar Classic regularity race.*

### MOTORBIKES: HONDA GAINS THE UPPER HAND

Four years ago, **Ricky Brabec** won the Dakar while picking up two stage victories along the way. Could the American add a second trophy to his case this year by playing the quiet game again? Riding without fanfare, avoiding blunders and staying in the ideal position to press forward without taking excessive risks, **Brabec** took over the reins of the rally following the previous special, the sixth of the rally. In the top 3 since day one, the Honda rider has truly come into his own, gaining an edge over his rivals in the dunes of the Empty Quarter. Of course, with another six gruelling stages ahead, his margin of under a minute over **Ross Branch** is far from guaranteeing him the triumph that he has been chasing for such a long time, not least because there are other riders who are still in the running too. **Adrien Van Beveren** made hay of the long 48-hour stage in the Saudi sands to narrow his deficit to the lead group. Now third overall at 9'21", the Frenchman remains a force to be reckoned with going into the second week. So is **Nacho Cornejo**, the winner of stages 2 and 4, who is just 14 minutes down on his Californian teammate and leader. A bit further down, **Toby Price** and **Kevin Benavides** fly the flag for KTM, less than half an hour behind **Brabec**. The Australian is biding his time, waiting for an opening to launch his attack, while the Argentinian, still grappling with the sequelae of a leg fracture, is picking up steam.

On the flip side, multiple pretenders to the crown saw their hopes and dreams crushed in the opening week. **Tosha Schareina**, the Spanish rising star who signed for Honda, broke his wrist in the very first stage after bagging the prologue. Meanwhile, **Skyler Howes** lost plenty of time in the first few stages, eventually bowing out due to mechanical issues in the dunes of the Empty Quarter. Staying with Honda, **Pablo Quintanilla** was in the lead group when he ran out of fuel during the soul-crushing stage 6 and plummeted down the overall. Other early withdrawals include **Sam Sunderland**, who succumbed to a mechanical in stage 3; Sherco's main hope, **Lorenzo Santolino**; and **Joan Barreda**, who was tackling his first Dakar with Hero. This leaves **Ross Branch** without a wingman for the second week of the rally after **Joaquim Rodrigues** and **Sebastian Bühler** crashed out of the race. Up against the mighty Honda brigade, the Botswanan will need a hefty dose of luck to overcome the many perils lurking on the road to Yanbu.

Meanwhile, in Rally 2, the incredible **Jean-Loup Lèpan** stormed to the lead after stage 6. The Frenchman, rock-solid since the Dakar got under way, also claimed stages 2 and 6 and, to top it off, he is sitting tenth overall, an hour and a half behind **Ricky Brabec**. Now second in the standings, **Romain Dumontier** held the lead for quite a while, but a fuel hiccup in stage 6 cost him a loss of 50 minutes to **Lèpan**. Nursing a broken rib, the winner of the 2023 Rally-Raid World Cup will have to grit his teeth all the way to Yanbu to snag a spot on the final podium. **Harith Noah**, **Paolo Lucci** and **Bradley Cox** are piling on the pressure within half an hour of the leader. **Heinz Kidigadner's** young nephew **Tobias Ebster** is another man to watch. The Austrian is perched at the top of the Original by Motul leader board and clinched stage 5 in the Rally 2 class. He will be the talk of the town for a long time to come.

Finally, in the quad race, **Manuel Andújar** and **Alexandre Giroud**, the two winners of the three previous editions, are known for their diesel-type approaches. The Frenchman's warm-up system took a bit longer than the Argentinian's. While the Dakar specialists picked up steam, the Brazilian **Marcelo Medeiros** burst onto the scene, grooving to a samba beat and taking control in the opening two stages. **Andújar** finished on the podiums of these specials while waiting for stage 4 to bring down the hammer, clinching the stage win and the overall lead with the French two-time reigning champion in his slipstream. **Andújar** is 20 minutes ahead of Giroud and 45 minutes clear of **Medeiros**.

### ULTIMATE: AUDI AT LONG LAST!

Riders, crews and pundits often end up eating a slice of humble pie when the race ventures into the desert. After six stages, but with a whole week of competition under their belts, the entrants often derided as "daredevils" have proved resilient to the vagaries of fate, while the usual paragons of consistency have made one uncharacteristic blunder after another. **Carlos Sainz** knows the formula for success in the Dakar, with a hat-trick of victories to his name (2010, 2018 and 2020), but he also has an unfortunate knack for self-sabotage. Having been the living embodiment of "haste makes waste" more than once and driving an RS Q e-Tron that had struggled to go the distance at the highest level, the Spaniard was far from the odds-on favourite for the 2024 title. Yet, lo and behold, there he is topping the leader board at the halfway point, as he was in his victorious campaigns in 2010 and 2020. Performance is a collective affair at Audi, with **Mattias Ekström** in second place. The Swede has been on an upward trajectory since the rally got under way in AIUla, building on his ninth-place finish from 2022 and swelling the ranks of the brand with the four interlocking rings near the top of the standings. Their closest rival still constitutes a serious threat. **Sébastien Loeb** can erase a 30-minute deficit in no time when everything falls into place. Like the Audi drivers, he took the daring gamble of losing time on purpose before tackling the sands of the Empty Quarter. After emerging more or less unscathed from the volcanic panic stage, he opened his 2024 account in the 48H Chrono, marking his 25th career triumph and reigniting hopes for Hunter to take its maiden win. The conqueror of the main course showcased his nerves of steel, a trait that he will undoubtedly need to scale to the top of the ranking while keeping a close eye on his two main rivals: the Brazilian Lucas Moraes, who can finish on the podium again if he survives the war of attrition, and the Belgian **Guillaume de Mevius**, who took his first stage win and lies in fifth place overall, 1 h 09 off the pace.

**Yazeed Al Rajhi** and **Nasser Al Attiyah** share a few parallels in their stellar driving careers. Both burst onto the Dakar scene, turning heads not just for their speed but also for their penchant for giving their cars a radical makeover, to put it mildly. Over the years, both have cultivated a reputation for staying cool behind the wheel and their Teflon-like resistance to panic, a mature approach that has brought Al Attiyah a whopping five titles. Meanwhile, his Saudi counterpart seemed poised to start his own trophy haul. **Al Rajhi** went into the 48H Chrono at the summit of the leader board, but he lost it after just 51 kilometres, when he somersaulted out of the lead and the race, a victim of his own overzealousness. In the next half of the same stage, **Al Attiyah** himself was a tad too eager to claw back into contention, pushing his luck until he wrecked a wheel, which cost him 2 h 30. Saudi Arabia seems to be no country for old winners this year: **Stéphane Peterhansel** readily admits as much, having squandered over two hours due to a puncture gone awry, with the jack and the entire hydraulic system failing in the dunes of stage 6. Meanwhile, **Guérlain Chicherit** was banking on his new Toyota Hilux to provide the stability that he felt was missing in the Dakar, only to be thwarted by mechanical woes, finding himself trailing by

1 h 58. He is bringing up the rear in the top 10, right behind **Mathieu Serradori**, ninth overall and top-ranked two-wheel driver.

### TRUCKS: BATAVIANS VS BOHEMIANS, ROUND 2

4-3 is the scorecard for the first half of the Dakar in the truck race. **Janus van Kasteren** has taken four victories (including the prologue) and **Martin Macík** three. It was a dream start for **Van Kasteren**, with a clean sweep of the first three specials. It looked like no-one could outpace the Dutchman in his quest for back-to-back titles, not even **Aleš Loprais**, his main rival last year before his early exit. The Czech has been giving it his all this time round, but **Van Kasteren** has always seemed one step ahead, leading the Dakar until the eve of the 48-hour showdown. In the end, the man who could finally Czech-mate **Van Kasteren** is **Martin Macík**, who has staged a remarkable comeback since his horrendous performance in stage 4, when he conceded over 35 minutes to the Dutchman. He kept fighting, waiting for his rivals to slip up... which finally happened in the 48 Chrono. Loprais dropped over an hour on the dunes of the Empty Quarter, while **Van Kasteren** lost almost three times as much. **Macík** scored a double whammy, seizing the stage win and the truck lead with more than 1 h 10 in hand over **Loprais**. **Mitchel van den Brink**, who is **Martin's** son and won a stage last year, is sitting in third place at 1 h 50.

### CHALLENGER: "LITTLE" GOCZAŁ WINS BIG

**Austin Jones** was a known quantity. Crowned in the SSV category in 2022, the American stole the show last season in his first appearance in the next-higher class, Challenger, once dubbed the T3 or lightweight prototype class. **Eryk Goczał**, son of **Marek** and nephew to **Michał**, is now carving out a similar path, except for the fact that this is only the Pole's second Dakar. At the tender age of 19, he is already making short work of the few opponents standing between him and the title, starting with the threats from his own stable. **Eryk** won the prologue, made it two in a row the next day and completed a three-peat in stage 2. His uncle's and his father's valiant attempts to steal the limelight came to naught. The runner-up to **Seth Quintero** in the W2RC Championship (T3), **Mitch Guthrie**, the brains behind the new Taurus T3 Max also in the **Goczał** arsenal, managed to deny **Eryk** what would have been his fourth consecutive win by a razor-thin margin of under a minute. "**Chaleco**" **López**, one of the most experienced drivers in the competition, posted the fastest time in stage 5, beating **Jones**, the reigning champion, and... **Eryk**, who bagged his fifth win in the 48H Chrono. The Pole and his right-hand man, **Oriol Mena**, effortlessly surfed the dunes of the Empty Quarter, wrapping up the opening week with five wins, a single puncture and a lead of more than an hour over **Guthrie** and almost an hour and a half over **Cristina Gutiérrez** and **López** in the overall. For sure, things can change at the drop of a hat in the Dakar, but it is hard to see who could stop "little" **Goczał** in his quest for a second consecutive title.

### SSV: GAME OF THRONES

The **Goczał** clan and **Rokas Baciūška** left for greener pastures, throwing the SSV competition wide open, as can be seen from the fact that there have been five different victors in seven specials. Unsurprisingly, no one contender stands head and shoulders above the rest. **Gerard Farrés** had a promising start, no doubt. The Spaniard, a two-time podium finisher in SSV (2019 and 2022), clinched stage 2 and seized the lead until he hit a chott in stage 5. He rolled over and had to wait for his support crew for nearly two hours before getting back on the move. **Jérôme de Sadeleer** inherited the Dakar lead. The Swiss, who had to skip the 2023 edition due to an injury sustained in an LMP3 race, lost half an hour on the dunes of the 48H Chrono and surrendered the overall lead to **Yasir Seaidan**. Standing on the podium of each special since his stage 3 win, the Saudi driver finished the first week at the summit of the leader board. Three minutes behind him is **Sara Price**, racing in her Dakar debut after finishing second in the Rallye du Maroc and picking up two stage wins along the way, with **Xavier de Soultrait** a further two minutes back. Some entrants have tasted glory both on bikes and in cars, including **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Cyril Despres** and, now, "**XdS**". Securing victory in the prologue, the Frenchman laid down the gauntlet, showcasing Polaris's ambitions with their new RZR. As the saying goes, "a year to learn, a year to win". Had it not been for a gearbox glitch in stage 3, **De Soultrait** would definitely be leading the SSV standings, bolstered by a hat-trick of victories including the 48H Chrono.

Keep a close eye on the **Sébastien Loeb** Racing crew, unless the winner of stage 4, **João Ferreira, Price** or **De Sadeleer** have other plans in mind.

### **CLASSIC: ARMED AT ALL POINTS**

The rest day could not have come at a better time for **Ondřej Klymčiw**, whose Škoda started haemorrhaging oil —and points— yesterday. Going into stage 6 after pulling ahead of **Carlos Santaolalla** in the previous stage, the Czech had finally managed to outmanoeuvre the Spaniard following a four-day mano a mano. The two rivals have spent the last week fighting for every last point! While leading the overall for three stages, **Carlos** and his HDJ 80 had never managed to widen their lead over the Škoda beyond 8 points. That all changed when the Czech landed a grievous blow on the Toyota. By the end of stage 5, **Ondřej** had not only regained the upper hand, but also padded his lead to 27 points, farming 36 points in a single stage! On the rest day, he trails car no. 768 by 56 points. Every little counts in the Dakar Classic, and the 2023 runner-up has positioned himself as a strong contender for victory halfway through the rally. Further back, **Paolo Bedeschi**, third in 2023, lies 190 points behind the man who beat him last season. The captains are steering the ship, with **Ondřej** at the helm...

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