

Al Salamiya, January 8th 2024

BENAVIDES AND MORAES: « RITMO LATINO »

FOCUS

The Dakar, which is continuing to explore the heart of Saudi Arabia, is taking great strides towards the desert of the Empty Quarter, with a leap of more than 600 kilometres today. However, before being totally immersed in sand, the riders, drivers and crews had to tackle a wide range of terrains, which were often conducive to navigation mistakes. The physical demands of this stage spared the sturdiest but also the calmest of the bikers, including **Kevin Benavides** who let his experience do the talking to triumph. On a day of surprises, **Lucas Moraes** also proved to be worthy of the challenge between dunes and canyons to pick up his first success on the Dakar.

OUTLINE

The configuration of this third stage made another cull of the competitors likely. It was as severe as had been announced for a number of leading riders who proved to be in too much of a hurry. In the order of disappearance from the rankings, **Sam Sunderland** went first, betrayed by his machine's mechanical problems after 11 kilometres of the special, followed by **Sebastian Bühler**, who fell severely after 360 km. In the meantime, a duo of openers came together at the forefront of the stage to lay down the tracks. **Pablo Quintanilla** and **Nacho Cornejo**, both team-mates with Monster Energy Honda, seemed set to make the day a Chilean festival. However, the victory that seemed promised to **Quintanilla** slipped from his grasp following the race stewards' announcement of a series of speeding penalties. Due to going much too fast through a zone restricted to 30 kmph, **Pablo** received a 6-minute penalty. However, **Kevin Benavides** was much more law abiding and kept up a high pace over the whole distance without ever losing his way, ending the day as the talk of the town, at last for a positive reason. Injured virtually throughout 2023, the Argentinean had not tasted the thrill of victory since his success on the last stage of the Dakar, the one which sealed his triumph. He is not back to that level yet, because he occupies 6th place in the general rankings, 20'32" behind leader **Ross Branch**, but maybe he can start thinking about overall success again. The horizon of outright victory is just as far off in the car category, in which the beneficiaries on the previous stage experienced very contrasting days. **Nasser Al Attiyah** drove his Hunter like a boss, until a series of punctures calmed him down, forcing him to even complete the last thirty kilometres on a wheel rim from which the rear left tyre had been ripped off. The outcome was even more severe for **Sébastien Loeb**, who lost 23 minutes in the sharp stones. In this race requiring as much skill as speed, **Lucas Moraes** proved to be the most delicate with his tyres and won his first stage on the Dakar (see Performance of the day). He has put himself in a position ready to pounce, at the foot of the podium dominated for the first time by **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, followed 29 seconds behind by **Carlos Sainz** and then **Mattias Ekström**, 8'26" behind. On this challenging stage to Al Salamiya, two surprising outsiders managed to invite themselves among the elite: **Romain Dumas** (5th) and **Mathieu Serradori** (7th).

Eryk Goczał's series of wins, taking in the prologue and first two stages, was halted in Al Salamiya by one of his many expected rivals, **Mitch Guthrie**, by a 1'09" margin. The young Polish driver reached the bivouac with the frustration of seeing his uncle **Michał** relegated to 1 hour 40 minutes from the lead, but still remains in control of the general rankings. In the SSV category, **Yasir Seaidan** completed a fine day for Saudi Arabia by beating **João Ferreira**, but without disrupting the calm progress of **Gerard Farrés** at the top of the rankings. On the other hand, the battle is taking shape in the truck race, with **Aleš Loprais** dethroning **Janus van Kasteren** from the leader's position thanks to his first victory of the year.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

After the sensation comes the time for confirmation. **Lucas Moraes's** performance on the Dakar 2023 already exuded an unexpected maturity. The Brazilian bided his time to climb onto the podium, while the battle for victory raged between **Nasser Al Attiyah** and **Sébastien Loeb**. His especially spectacular introduction to the Dakar was followed by a lacklustre season in which he stayed away from W2RC events and discreetly honed his driving skills in the Brazilian Baja Championship. However, since the start of the Dakar 2024, Lucas has stepped up to the plate, while many of the top drivers have had their tyres shredded by the sharp flinty rocks. With the delicate balance between caution and speed that is so difficult to find, the driver of Toyota Hilux number 206 was able to attract the touch of success needed in order to shine, winning on completion of the day's 437-kilometre special by the slim margin of 9 seconds ahead of **Mattias Ekström**. It is likely that neither of them will stop there.

A CRUSHING BLOW

In 2022, **Sam Sunderland** experienced a dream year punctuated by a series of successes which could have inspired a documentary entitled "*The Crown*". He opened the inaugural season of the W2RC by winning his second Dakar, following his first in 2017, then swiftly achieved his 3rd triumph on the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge, before completing the year at the Andalucia Rally with coronation as the FIM world champion, also offering GasGas the icing on the cake of the constructors' title for its first year in the discipline. However, since then, the "king" of 2022 has endured a genuine string of misfortunes: "**SunderSam**" has rhymed with DNF (did not finish); firstly, the Dakar 2023 on stage 1, the Sonora Rally, the Desafio Ruta 40, the Rallye du Maroc and now the Dakar 2024. Out of these five consecutive rallies, Sam has only completed 10 stages, including the prologues, all episodes for which his majesty would have preferred to have missed the broadcast.

STAT OF THE DAY : 38

Lucas Moraes was the revelation of the 2023 edition, completing his first participation on the podium. However, despite a faultless display, he was not able to pick up a stage victory, but today he set that record straight. With a win on stage three, he has become the first Brazilian to taste success on a special in the car category. Several countrymen had already shown him the example, starting with the de Azevedo brothers: firstly **André** in a truck during the 1999 edition and then **Jean** in 2005 behind the handlebars of a KTM bike. This series also includes victories in the SSV category, accompanied by titles for **Leandro Torres** in 2017 and **Reinaldo Varela** in 2018. More recently, **Rodrigo Luppi de Oliveira** made a contribution in 2022, as did **Cristiano Batista** last year. What's more, no later than yesterday, **Marcelo Medeiros** raised his total of stage wins to 10 in the quad race. Today, with **Moraes**, the Brazilians on the Dakar boast 38 triumphs!

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I think it was fantastic. For sure I can't explain why it looks easy because it very much isn't especially the middle part today where I've never seen dunes like that; they were the size of skyscrapers. We were really challenged to get past them. But I think that's the part where we gained the most time, which I'm very happy and proud of. Just at the end, we lost a little bit of time with the waypoints, but we turned back, we passed everything, so no penalties and that's good. I'll be honest, I'm not a good strategist, so I'll just do what I do and have fun in the car. We keep the car safe. Every day everything is how it's supposed to be. That's how I want to continue, and maybe have a good race with my family. Compared to the car I drove last year, there's no comparison, because this one feels like a real rally car. It has the sequential gearbox which is a step closer to the T1 cars, which I really also want to learn to drive, which I dream of and I think the durability of it after three stages like this is incredible. With the T4, maybe we would have it in pieces". - Eryk Goczał

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

Ondřej Klymčiw stands out on the Dakar Classic. Formerly a very skilled biker, he switched straight to the Dakar Classic in 2021, without trying out the Dakar on four wheels. It is in a Škoda 130 LR, which has no history on the Dakar but was his country's national car in his childhood, that he has been competing since the first edition. Today, the Czech driver proved to be a match for **Carlos Santaolalla Milla** who won by just 4 points. The number 2 on the 2023 edition only has a lead of 8 points over **Ondřej**, who could go on to write Škoda onto the Dakar roll of honour for the first time in its history.

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

Challenger, a category tailor-made for **Eryk Goczał**

Eryk Goczał made his emergence on the radar of the rally-raid discipline via the Dakar last year, like a shooting star through the SSV category, racing by at the speed of sound. With a win at the tender age of 18 years, the Polish driver became the youngest winner in the event's history before disappearing to devote himself to his studies. He has returned for his 2nd Dakar in the Challenger class, in which he is aiming for another title before the world crown in the W2RC. It is a challenge worthy of the kid with the eternal smile, around whom the **Goczał** galaxy revolves. His father **Marek** and uncle **Michał** have followed in his footsteps and the impact is already being felt by the established names in the former T3 category, who, having got rid of the other prodigy, **Seth Quintero**, had hoped to have a tilt at the title in peace. **Mitch Guthrie** has already suffered the domination of the Poles but is showing himself to be up to the challenge. With a win today, **Mitch Junior** brought **Eryk's** series of three consecutive victories since the start in AIUIa to a close. This evening, drifting off to sleep under the stars over the bivouac, the youngest of the **Goczał** clan still boasts a lead of 15'47" over his father and 15'58" over the American.

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