

Yanbu, January 19th 2024

BRABEC AND SAINZ, MASTERS OF THE DUNES

Key points:

- *The 46th edition of the Dakar, the 5th to be organised in Saudi Arabia, has finished after more than 4,700 kilometres of specials and a total distance of almost 8,000 kilometres, which tested the riders, drivers, co-pilots and crews, from the ancient city of AIUla to the shores of the Red Sea, passing through the oceans of dunes in the Empty Quarter.*
- *The major winners of the 2024 edition have each, in their own way, taken advantage of teams capable of building success based on their collective strength. Among the favourites in the Monster Energy Honda clan, American Ricky Brabec won a second title following his triumph in 2020, by resisting Ross Branch on his Hero, the first Indian bike to grace the Dakar podium, onto which Adrien Van Beveren climbed for the first time in his career, with third place, also riding a Honda.*
- *In the car category, there was an unexpected consecration for the hybrid Audi driven by Carlos Sainz. In his duel with Sébastien Loeb, who in the end finished 3rd, the Spaniard picked up his fourth title thanks partially to the back-up provided by his team-mates Stéphane Peterhansel and Mattias Ekström, as El Matador finished with a lead of 1 hour and 20 minutes over Belgian Guillaume de Mevius.*
- *On the final stage, the battle in the Challenger class was turned on its head, to the detriment of Mitch Guthrie and in favour of Cristina Gutiérrez, who became the first female driver to win a Dakar title since Jutta Kleinschmidt in 2001.*
- *In the SSV category, Xavier de Soultrait also won by the narrowest of margins, having failed to win in his career on a motorbike but taking victory in a Polaris driving for the Sébastien Loeb Racing team, which will be a small consolation for the man from Alsace.*
- *Lastly, thanks to Martin Macík, the truck category witnessed the Czech Republic's grand return to the summit of the rally, 23 years after the country's last triumph was earned by Karel Loprais, whose nephew Aleš Loprais finished as runner-up to Macík.*
- *In total, 239 vehicles (versus 340 that took starter's orders) reached Yanbu, including 96 bikes (vs 132), 7 quads (vs 10), 55 Ultimate class cars (vs 70), 3 Stock class cars (vs 3), 29 Challenger class cars (vs 42), 28 SSVs (vs 36) and 21 trucks (vs 47). Among them, the riders, drivers and crews of 182 vehicles were able to climb onto the final podium to receive a finisher's medal, with the remainder not having completed the entirety of the route.*
- *Finally, the 4th edition of the Dakar Classic, which brought together 78 vehicles, finished with 71 crews. Spaniard Carlos Santaolalla Milla won the race for regularity. The Mission 1000 terrains challenge enabled 10 vehicles powered by innovative alternative engine technologies to tackle the of the Dakar and look ahead to the future.*

MOTORBIKES:

Rally GP: an unshakeable performance by Brabec

Ricky Brabec took the lead on the rally in the dunes of the Empty Quarter on the formidable 48 HR Chrono stage, which drove plenty of riders into a corner, and held on to first place all the way to Yanbu to pick up his second triumph on the Dakar. This year's success was even more tasty than four years previously, because **Ross Branch** pushed him all the way. To help him resist, **Brabec** was able to count on the support of his team-mates, particularly **Adrien Van Beveren** who often opened with the Californian. The Frenchman took advantage of this teamwork to finish third and climb onto the podium for the first time in nine participations, which was a deliverance for the man who claims to live, breathe and train all year long for the Dakar... **Van Beveren** owes his success not only to the progress he has made on rocky terrain but also to his Honda which allowed him to confidently attack from start to finish. The Japanese constructor put two of its representatives on the podium to pick up its eighth success on the Dakar. What's more, if it was not for a fuel pump problem towards the end of the rally, **Nacho Cornejo** may also have been able to join his team-mates on an entirely red podium. In order to do so, he and **Van Beveren** would have had to have toppled the heroic Hero rider **Ross Branch**. The hard-nosed man from Botswana was a candidate for overall victory right up to the finish, even though he had been

deprived of his team-mates, who dropped out one after another due to falls or mechanical problems. **Branch** led during the first week before being overtaken by **Brabec** who was coming into top form. Nevertheless, the native of Botswana has offered the African continent a podium finish for the first time since **Alfie Cox** took third place in 2005. Furthermore, thanks to **Ross Branch**, Hero has become the first Indian constructor to feature on the Dakar podium. It was an edition to forget for all the KTMs, broadly speaking. The **Benavides** brothers, **Toby Price** and **Daniel Sanders** were never able to contest the domination exerted by the Honda riders. Since 2020, KTM has always put one of its riders on the podium, which means this year's performance is a blow for the constructor. What's more, it is the first time since 1993 that no European constructors are on the final podium.

Rally 2: India steps up to the plate

The Rally 2 class was also full of surprises and new names. After having shone during the first week, **Jean-Loup Lèpan** and **Romain Dumontier** flagged before reaching Yanbu. The former lost time following a navigation error and the latter did likewise due to the consequences of a broken exhaust. The two Frenchmen's misfortune smiled, however, on **Harith Noah**. The Indian rider, who was the only remaining Sherco representative at the finishing line, gathered momentum throughout the second week to take the lead in the category just before the finish to score a historical success because it is the first Indian triumph on the Dakar. **Noah** claims to have obtained this victory without focusing on the result, simply by concentrating on his riding to make sure he reached the finishing line of each stage. This winning formula also worked for **Tobias Ebster**, the best rookie and the sensation of the Dakar 2024. The young nephew of **Heinz Kinigadner** triumphed in the Original by Motul category for unassisted bikers and even managed to finish his first Dakar in the overall top 20 for the bikes, a remarkable feat. In the quad category, the fight for victory was played out between **Manuel Andújar** and **Alexandre Giroud**. This time the Frenchman, who won the last two editions, finished as runner-up to the Argentinean, who last won the rally in 2021.

ULTIMATE: LORD OF THE KING

Not many observers were ready to bet on a happy end for Audi's adventure on the Dakar. When it decided in 2022 to embark on the daring gamble of leading a hybrid vehicle to success, the German constructor made a strong impact by hiring **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Carlos Sainz** and **Mattias Ekström**. It then made a very good first impression by immediately winning 4 stages, with the Spanish champion the first driver that year to give shape to such an ambitious technological revolution. Perhaps it was a sign of destiny, even when the RS Q e-Tron cars went through lean times, specifically on the 2023 vintage, when only one of the three vehicles, driven by **Ekström**, made it to the finish in 14th place in the general rankings. The rest of the season was not much better, despite the single Audi victory obtained by 'Peter' in Abu Dhabi. The trio even seemed somewhat down in the dumps on arriving in AlUla. Everything changed in the Empty Quarter, which **Carlos Sainz** approached without having made the slightest mistake before resisting the difficulties of the 48 HR Chrono stage while all his rivals were scattered all over the place: **Yazeed Al Rajhi** rolled his car and exited the race, **Nasser Al Attiyah** plummeted out of the reckoning on his favourite terrain, though **Sébastien Loeb** breathed new life into his quest for overall victory and represented a genuine threat for week two.

The promised duel indeed took place and both El Matador and the hunter from Alsace hit stumbling blocks, especially on stage 10. While **Carlos** was able to take advantage of support from his two team-mates, who were distanced in the general rankings but still able to provide a reassuring convoy for their team leader, **Seb**, forced to embark on a risky high-speed chase, eventually failed in his comeback, yet he did manage to save a place (3rd) on the final podium in extremis, the 5th of his career in eight participations. Arriving in Yanbu as the four-ringed brand's hero, **Sainz** sealed a fourth victory on the Dakar, putting him on par with **Ari Vatanen** in the history books, but having won with four different constructors (Volkswagen, Mini, Peugeot and Audi) over a 14-year period!

Between **Sainz's** Audi and **Loeb's** Prodrive Hunter, a third brand climbed onto the podium (a first since 2019), but it was not driven by the most expected pretender at this level. Following the departure of **Al Attiyah**, Toyota were considerably counting on **Yazeed Al Rajhi** to pick up the torch, but that came to nothing. Instead, **Guerlain Chicherit** was among those best placed to finally achieve consecration, though a poor start with a time loss of 1 hour and 30 minutes on stage 4 put paid to his chances. Nevertheless, the man from Savoy managed to bounce back in a battling manner to obtain the best

finish of his career, at the foot of the podium, with two stage wins under his belt. Above all, **Chicherit** can be delighted that his team recruited their own prodigal son, young Belgian driver **Guillaume de Mevius**, who, also behind the wheel of a Hilux, reached the second step of the final podium on his first participation in the queen category. In the Toyota clan (combining Overdrive and Gazoo Racing) this will have helped to swallow the rather bitter pill of **Seth Quintero's** lukewarm debut (40th) or the tumble down the general rankings from 3rd to 9th place suffered by **Lucas Moraes** two days from the finish.

The top ten places were at a premium at the end of this week, because behind **Martin Prokop**, the 3rd former WRC driver in the top 5, the five other members of the elite were all within a 25-minute time bracket and all changed positions during the last three days: for better for **Guy Boterill** (6th), **Giniel de Villiers** (7th) and **Benediktas Vanagas** (8th), but for worse for **Moraes** (9th) and **Mathieu Serradori** (10th). For the third best placed Frenchman, it will be scant consolation that he finished with the title for two-wheel drive cars, given that he was still in 6th place at the start of stage 11.

TRUCKS: MAGIC MACIK

The Czech Republic flag fluttering in the breeze above the Lac Rose is a classic image from the 1990s, an era synonymous with the Tatra driven by **Karel Loprais**, who picked up his last triumph in 2001. Back home, to pick up the torch, his countrymen were naturally counting on his nephew, **Aleš Loprais**, who has come near to triumph without ever obtaining consecration (3rd in 2007, 4th in 2015, 5th in 2019-21). In the end, it was **Martin Macík** who put his country back at the top of the truck category, with plenty of panache. And yet, at first nobody had seemed able to beat **Janus van Kasteren** in the fight for the title, not even **Aleš Loprais**, his main rival last year before a premature exit. **Loprais** tried valiantly at the beginning of the race, but **van Kasteren** was always a step ahead. As for **Macík**, he took time to warm up. After having been distanced by three quarters of an hour by the evening of stage 4, he displayed patience, waiting to pounce on his rivals' slightest mistakes. As the saying goes, time comes to he who waits. During the 48 HR Chrono stage, the sixth stage which was contested over two days and which **Macík** deemed to be the hardest out of his 12 participations on the Dakar, **Loprais** lost more than 1 hour in the dunes of the Empty Quarter. The sanction was almost three times as bad for **van Kasteren**, crushing the Dutchman's hopes of defending his title. This propelled **Macík** to the top of the general rankings. Behind the wheel of his faithful Iveco affectionately nicknamed 'Cenda', **Macík** featured in the top three for each of the stages since day five of the rally. With four stage wins under his belt and a lead of almost 2 hours on arrival in Yanbu, the crew of 'Cenda' ultimately enjoyed an untroubled second week of the race.

CHALLENGER: NEVER GIVE UP

The disqualification of **Eryk Goczał** and his uncle **Michał**, as well as the withdrawal of his father **Marek**, completely changed the fight for the title in the Challenger class. On the evening of the rest day, **Mitch Guthrie** found himself in the lead in the general rankings, twenty minutes ahead of **Cristina Gutiérrez**, his nearest pursuer. With a win on stage 7 and a podium finish the following day, **Guthrie** was managing to maintain a sufficient time cushion to control the race up to the end of the rally and the victory which seemed within his grasp. After all, it would have been no less than a fair reward for the man who developed the initial version of the Taurus T3 Max. However, as the saying goes, the race is never over until the last finishing line has been crossed and it proved to be true once again in the most unpredictable manner. **Guthrie** only had 174 kilometres left to cover to succeed his countryman **Austin Jones** on the Dakar throne, but this was without taking into account the mechanical problem that occurred just seven kilometres into the special. Helped by his co-pilot **Kellon Walch**, he managed to resume racing, but his lead soon dropped to a little more than 1'30". This heavy toll rapidly became heavier as the stage went on, on a special that soon turned in **Gutiérrez's** favour. *"If something happens behind you, you never know... I pushed myself until the finish,"* explained the Spaniard. *"One of my values is to never give up."* **Guthrie** tried to save the day, but the transmission of his Taurus decided otherwise. He eventually reached the finish more than half an hour after his rival and will have to console himself with the second place on the final podium, which was completed by **Rokas Baciūška** who, one year ago, lost the Dakar in similar circumstances in the SSV category. **Gutiérrez** has become the second woman to win a title on the Dakar following **Jutta Kleinschmidt**, who was the quickest of the elite cars in 2001.

SSV: DE SOULTRAIT GOES DOWN THE WIRE

Xavier De Soultrait and his co-pilot **Martin Bonnet** can stop holding their breath now that they have made it to the finish. Nonetheless, it was a close thing for the two Frenchman in their Polaris. For this

Dakar, the American factory went one step further, developing a lighter, sharper, higher-performance RZR PRO R. The recipe worked from the outset, with the Sébastien Loeb Racing (SLR) duo taking victory on the prologue to give a foretaste of what was to come. **De Soultrait** was a regular and consistent performer and also took advantage of the ups and downs experienced by some of his rivals, such as **Gerard Farrés**, to make his way to the top of the race hierarchy, which he reached on the evening of stage 7. With three victories to his name, **João Ferreira** did try to play spoilsport, but the Portuguese driver lost more than an hour at the end of stage 9. After respectively winning stages 10 and 11, **Sara Price** and **Jérôme de Sadeleer** then placed themselves among the contenders. Following a penalty on stage 10, 'XDS' only had a lead of a little more than ten minutes over the American, who put herself out of the race for the title the following day by losing more than one hour due to a navigation mistake. As for **de Sadeleer**, he almost succeeded in his mission by coming to within three minutes of the leader with 174 kilometres left before the finish. However, like an old Dakar veteran, **de Soultrait** held on. He did not let his Swiss rival out of his sight and in the end only lost around twenty seconds overall. As a result, he has won his first title on the Dakar. To complete an already rich harvest for the Polaris camp, **Florent Vayssade**, **de Soultrait's** team-mate, won the final special stage. It was a successful gamble for Polaris, who put an end to an almost unchallenged reign by Can-Am.

CLASSIC: CARLOS SANTAOLALLA MILLA, THE OTHER MATADOR

The 4th edition of the Dakar Classic has been won by a Spaniard by the name of **Carlos**. Not **Sainz**, but **Santaolalla Milla**, a fierce competitor like 'El Matador' and one who has been chasing victory for three editions. Following 6th in 2022 and 2nd last year, this year, with his Toyota HDJ 80, the other **Carlos** dominated an edition that will go down as one of the most hotly contested since its creation. Challenged by **Ondřej Klymčiw** in the first week, another regular in the consolation places like **Carlos**, it was then **Lorenzo Traglio** who threatened to come back to within a point of the Spaniard with two days to go. Both the Czech's Škoda and the Italian's Nissan Pathfinder suffered minor mechanical problems. That is a detail that cannot be forgiven when fighting against an '80'. **Carlos Santaolalla Milla** and **Jan Rosa I Vinas** therefore won in Yanbu. No title holder has yet managed to retain the title on the Dakar Classic, but the Spaniards look like they could become serial success collectors, just like their countryman from Madrid. See you in 2025!

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