

AIUla, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024

## CAR RACE: AL ATTIYAH AND LOEB - ALLIES IN THEORY, RIVALS IN PRACTICE

### Key points:

- *A maelstrom of transfers has shaken up the pre-Dakar landscape in the category, which was renamed to Ultimate a couple of months ago ahead of the 46th edition of the rally and the 2024 W2RC season. From 5 to 19 January, the rivalry between Nasser Al Attiyah and Sébastien Loeb, the two titans who vied for victory in the previous two editions, will reach a whole new level in Saudi Arabia as they go head to head for the first time behind the wheel of the same machine —a Prodrive Hunter T1+.*
- *The Toyota clan has lost its Qatari captain, who brought home three trophies, but it still has a roster of XXL contenders, with Yazeed Al Rajhi, Lucas Moraes and Giniel de Villiers returning for another shot at the title, along with the fresh recruits Guerlain Chicherit, Guillaume de Mevius and Seth Quintero.*
- *The multiple-time champions Stéphane Peterhansel and Carlos Sainz, still a force to be reckoned with, are hell-bent on propelling their hybrid Audis to the top of the ranking. X-raid will also be chasing the honours with Vaidotas Žala and Krzysztof Hołowczyc, as will Century with Mathieu Serradori and MD Rallye with Christian Lavieille and Simon Vitse, while Ford is making its debut as a constructor in the Dakar with "Nani" Roma in the cockpit of its prototype.*

The established order on planet rally raids was turned upside down in 2023. **Nasser Al Attiyah**, the five-time Dakar champion (including three victories behind the wheel of a Toyota Hilux, whose T1+ version was an exquisite blend of reliability and high performance), and his co-driver, **Mathieu Baumel**, seemed to be comfortably at the top of the pile. **Sébastien Loeb** emerged as the Qatari's most formidable challenger, finishing as runner-up to him in the previous two editions after another tantalising second place in 2017, right behind his then-teammate at Peugeot, **Stéphane Peterhansel**. Their hunger grew unabated throughout the rest of the year, with **Al Attiyah** and **Loeb** winning a combined 24 of the 34 stages at stake in the W2RC (14 versus 10). After mounting a successful title defence, the world champion demonstrated his penchant for the unexpected by parting ways with the Overdrive TGR squad and joining Prodrive, a team that has defied conventional wisdom by crafting an ultra-competitive Hunter T1+ in just three short seasons. The sport's two titans are now united under the same banner and armed with equal firepower, allied by the vagaries of the transfer market but still rivals for the most prestigious title of the season.

However, this match made in heaven is far from spelling the end of the Toyota clan's championship aspirations. The outfit of the Belgian Jean-Marc Fortin and its South African branch, Gazoo Racing, have managed to retain a great deal of their most experienced Hilux drivers while also making astute signings. Among the veterans, their best bet is probably **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, who finished on the bottom step of the podium two years ago and is heading into his tenth start as the reigning champion of the Rallye du Maroc and runner-up in the W2RC. Last year's third place was also filled by a Toyota driver, the Brazilian **Lucas Moraes**, who was the breakout star of 2023 in his rookie season and is back in AIUla to prove that it was no flash in the pan. Third was also the position of another talent honed by Toyota, **Juan Cruz Yacopini**, at the end of a promising W2RC season during which he turned 24. The 2009 Dakar winner, **Giniel de Villiers**, has little left to prove. It would be foolish to write him off following his fourth place last

year, the latest of a whopping fifteen top 5 finishes in twenty Dakar starts. The newcomers are also making waves, with **Guerlain Chicherit**, who got his mojo back last year (tenth overall with two stage wins), being lured by the siren call of the "Toy" and bringing **Guillaume De Mevius** along for the ride. **De Mevius** is ready to make the quantum leap from Challenger (third in 2023) to Ultimate. The most anticipated promotion, however, is probably that of **Seth Quintero**, the young American who racked up stage wins in Challenger (twenty in three starts) and wrapped up the first part of his career with the W2RC title in the bag. The question of his transition to the big leagues at just 21 years old will be one of the key storylines of the Dakar.

Still, the eagerly awaited showdown between Toyota and Hunter is not silencing the ambitions of the rest of the field. The 2023 edition tempered the enthusiasm of Audi drivers, but the performance of the RS Q e-Tron E2 still allows for plenty of hope... as long as the reliability is on par. **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Carlos Sainz** and **Mattias Ekström** all have what it takes to battle for the top of the leader board. Reliability will also be a litmus test for the prototype developed by Ford and entrusted to the expert hands of **Joan "Nani" Roma**, a winner on two wheels in 2004 and later in a car in 2014. Mini X-Raid are spreading their bets between the experience of **Vaidotas Žala** and a returning **Krzysztof Hołowczyc**, on the one hand, and the youthful verve of the Spaniard **Pau Navarro**, on the other hand. Two-wheel drive entrants have no intention to watch from the sidelines either. Even though the South African manufacturer Century has already got one foot in the T1+ category, it is putting its faith in **Mathieu Serradori** for one last hurrah in the CR6, and why not **Laia Sanz**, who has yet to blossom into her full potential in the car race. Equally committed to promoting 2WDs, the MD Rallye team has unveiled this season an Evo 5 version of its Optimus buggy, which has a legitimate shot at a top 10 finish with **Christian Lavieille** or **Simon Vitse**.

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