

Al Hofuf, January 9th 2024

CORNEJO LIKE A BOSS, LOEB BACK TO WINNING WAYS

FOCUS

Leaving the tents at the bivouac in Al Salamiya to head towards the city of Al Hofuf, next to one of the country's biggest oases, home to three million date palms. In between the two, the total distance to be covered measured almost 700 km, but the riders, drivers and crews "only" did battle over 299 of them. It is very difficult to cover as much distance in Saudi Arabia without encountering any dunes, but the day's portions were negligible. Top speeds of approximately 150 kmph were often reached on this quick special, on which **Nacho Cornejo** was able to show that he is not just an excellent navigator, to such an extent that he took the lead in the bike category general rankings. High-speed driving is also the speciality of **Sébastien Loeb**, who today orchestrated his reappearance at the top of the stage rankings.

OUTLINE

There were no specific difficulties on the programme for this fourth stage, but that did not mean there would not be any first-class performances. The one produced by **Nacho Cornejo** can definitely be classed in this category. His hallmark is ultra-rapid reading and especially interpretation of the roadbook. The Chilean again showed his worth in this domain, even if he did not have to open the way on the special, having been the sixth rider to start. However, the Honda rider knows how to open his throttle when opportunity knocks and he did not do things by halves! On reaching the finishing line, he won the stage and also took the lead in the general rankings, taking advantage of **Ross Branch's** two crashes, both of which were fortunately not serious. The man from Botswana lost the three-minute lead he had yesterday and even gave away an extra one. Tomorrow, on the way to Shubaytah, **Cornejo** will have to ride like a boss: the last time he was in this position, he let victory slip from his grasp due to a fall 48 hours before the end of the Dakar 2021. Losing the Dakar two days from consecration is also something that **Sébastien Loeb** has experienced, the last time he led the general rankings, at the time behind the wheel of a Peugeot in 2017 near San Juan in Argentina. The Frenchman is not quite at the same level yet but has gently gone about starting his comeback by winning the stage finishing in Al-Hofuf. The gaps achieved have not shaken up the race hierarchy, but to begin with he has climbed up three places and now occupies 6th position, 23'50" behind **Yazeed Al Rajhi**. In complete control of his new role of general rankings leader in the Ultimate class, the Saudi driver only gave away just over one minute to **Loeb**. As a result, tomorrow he will be joining **Nasser Al Attiyah** (3rd on the stage, 1'22" behind the winner) in setting off in pursuit of the best rally driver of all time, but on a terrain which suits them best: the dunes of the Empty Quarter.

It is a safe bet that the ocean of dunes will not remove the smile from the face of **Eryk Goczał**, who picked up a fourth special victory in the Challenger class (see Performance of the day), but the battle promises to be fiercer for their smaller cousins in the SSV category, in which Portugal's **João Ferreira** was the quickest, without dislodging **Gerrard Farrés** from the top of the general rankings. The lead has not changed in the truck race with **Janus van Kasteren** producing the best time for the fourth time in five days of racing. Nevertheless, he has a lead of only 5'17" over **Aleš Loprais** in the general rankings, so there is still everything to play for.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

We already knew he was fast. At the tender age of 18 years, **Eryk Goczał** had already won four stages in the T4 class on his first participation on the Dakar, even finishing on top of the general rankings following a dramatic turn of events on the last special. This year, he has quite simply doubled his total

amount of stage wins in five days of racing, including the prologue, and is well ahead in the Challenger class with a lead of half an hour over none other than his father! There is a threat against his dominance, with **Mitch Guthrie** 36 minutes behind and **Austin Jones** trailing by 1 hour and 5 minutes, but the question of strategy now arises for the young Polish driver. Will he take the risk of seeking out stage victories every day, or will he prefer to manage his race with the aim of picking up a second consecutive title that is well within his grasp if he looks after his Taurus? To be continued...

A CRUSHING BLOW

In the clan of general rankings leader **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, not everyone has the same reason as the Saudi to be happy. Firstly, the Hilux T1+ driven by **Guerlain Chicherit** played up right in the middle of the special when the power steering gave up the ghost. From then on, the man from Savoy was forced to drive slowly and rely on the strength of his arms to turn. His deficit at the finishing line was substantial, trailing in more than one hour behind **Loeb**. His hopes of outright victory on the Dakar are crushed, even if he can still try to rejoin the top 10 as he did in a similar context last year. Such an outcome will not even be possible for **Seth Quintero**, also a newcomer to Toyota, who had shown that he could keep pace with the favourites up until today, when, after 216 km, the emerging American star ground to a halt with a broken engine. Without any other solution than waiting for his team's assistance truck in order to be towed by road to the bivouac in Al Hofuf, **Quintero** will receive a 20-hour time penalty. This is exactly the same type of mishap that befell him in the T3 category, from which he bounced back to sweep up most of the stage victories. Let's see if "the kid" can repeat such a feat...

STAT OF THE DAY

74. Ignacio "**Nacho**" **Cornejo** won his eighth stage on the Dakar today and also contributed to improving his country's performance because Chile's total of stage wins has risen to 74 over all the different categories. This sequence was started by the late **Carlo de Gavardo**, on a bike. Since then, another **Ignacio**, namely **Casale**, distinguished himself by winning the Dakar three times in the quad category, picking up 23 specials in the process. **Francisco "Chaleco" López** has done even better, to earn the status of national standard bearer, with 11 victories on two wheels and then 13 more achieved since his reconversion in the SSV category.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

*"After 50 or 60 km we took the lead, to open the way and it was not easy. We had a slow puncture before 150 to 180 km. As we went on the tyre pressure started to drop, and the back of the car dropped, until it reached 1.4 bar by the finish, but it's ok. It's lucky we slowed over the last 100 km, but everything is going well. I'm always ready for the desert, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week". - **Yazeed Al Rajhi***

MISSION 1000

The HySE (Hydrogen Small mobility) project has already achieved the feat of bringing together Japan's biggest manufacturers - Toyota, Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki and Yamaha - to design a hydrogen-powered SSV, the very first version of which they are presenting as part of the Mission 1000 challenge. They have entrusted it to a duo made up of American **Jamie Campbell** and **Bruno Jacomy**. The driver went through a range of emotions today: *"On this stage, there were almost 35 km of dunes followed by several fairly rocky portions. It was stressful because it's the first time I've driven in the dunes, but fortunately Bruno is a very good navigator. We got stuck for 25 minutes but in the end we managed to extricate ourselves. We had virtually almost no power left at the very end of the stage and an alarm went off forcing us to get out of the car just after the finishing line. We just had to wait a bit and it was sorted out".*

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

Carlos Santaolalla Milla, the runner-up on the 2023 edition, is just like his Toyota HDJ 80: indestructible. Once again today, he withstood the attacks from the Škoda driven by **Ondřej Klymčiw**, even gaining an extra point on him in the general rankings. It was a surgically precise battle between competitors with their eyes riveted on the rate regulator, an electronic instrument that allows them to see whether they are ahead or behind the required average. There are some competitors who want to relive the sensations of the first Dakar rallies, when electronics had not yet invaded the cockpits or even the engines. **François-Xavier Bourgois** is such a person and is finally back behind the wheel of his 504 Peugeot coupé this year thanks to the work of his co-pilot **Patrice Auzet**. "FX" and **Patrice** follow their feelings, taking their speed information from the speedometer and estimating without assistance whether they are ahead or behind on each section. This is a much more classical approach to rally-raids, which yesterday placed them in 25th position overall, well ahead of the results obtained on the two previous editions by the French car with its high-fashion Italian style decoration. It just goes to show that a well-oiled machine and rule of thumb can pay off in the long run on the Dakar Classic!

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

The Dakar aces at the helm

The ten quads enrolled on the Dakar all signed up for the W2RC 2024, most notably **Laisvydas Kancius**, winner of the world cup in 2023. The Lithuanian usually starts off discretely but sees his commitment through to the end. For the moment, the man with the mane of blond hair has still not graced the race's podium. Four stage winners have instead shared these honours, with Brazilian **Marcos Medeiros** predominant thanks to two stage victories. The Argentineans **Moreno** and **Andújar**, as well as **Giroud**, have shared the rest of the cake, with one stage each. In the general rankings, the **Andújar** leads. The winner of the Dakar in 2021 has his heart set on renewing acquaintance with success on the Dakar, which he has not finished since his consecration. **Alexandre Giroud** has been a finisher on the last two editions, on the top step of the podium to boot, with the Frenchman now aiming for a hat-trick. The Argentinean leader of the general rankings, like the Frenchman 21'24" behind, is playing for high stakes on the Dakar. This pressure could benefit Brazilian **Marcos Medeiros**, who is currently in third position but less than 3 minutes behind **Giroud**. **Kancius**, fifth in the general rankings, more than one and half hours behind the leader, is unlikely to give into the pressure exerted by the performances of those in front of him on the Dakar. The route to Yanbu is still long in a category where mechanical reliability often makes the difference, especially in the dunes, which are on the menu for the next three days...

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PRESS CONTACT: pressedakar@aso.fr