

AIUla, January 4th 2024

1 DAY TO GO: THE CALL OF THE DESERT

Key points:

- *On the day before the start of the 46th edition, the riders, drivers and crews have completed the technical and administrative scrutineering circuit, an essential rite of passage in order to feature on the official list of starters, the figures for which will be unveiled during the evening.*
- *Dakar and W2RC title holder Nasser Al Attiyah will be competing behind the wheel of a Hunter BRX for the first time, with Sébastien Loeb as a team-mate; according to both men, they will be more allies than rivals. However, Guerlain Chicherit, who in the past has partnered the two major favourites, will this time be an adversary behind the wheel of the latest version of the Toyota Hilux, renowned for its reliability. This quality is something that must be reached by the Audi team in order for Stéphane Peterhansel, Carlos Sainz and Mattias Ekström to do battle for outright victory.*
- *In-house rivalries will also not be out of the question at KTM, with Toby Price having been much more consistent lately than the winner in 2023, Kevin Benavides, who has just recovered from an injury. Internal tussles could also feature in the Honda ranks, who are starting with six pretenders for the crown.*
- *All the riders, drivers and co-pilots will get to grips with the action on the 27-km prologue on the programme for Friday, but beforehand have been invited to put on a show for the welcome ceremony organised by the Royal Commission of AIUla. As part of a show including traditional singing and dancing, BMX acrobatics, a sound and light show, plus several DJ sets, the competitors will parade, for once on foot, on the grand stage at the "Start Camp".*

A GAME OF THRONES FOR AL ATTIYAH AND LOEB

Nasser Al Attiyah and **Sébastien Loeb**, the two direct rivals on the most recent editions of the Dakar in which the Frenchman successively finished in the runner-up position to the Qatari, will be team-mates for the first time in their careers as part of the Prodrive team. An old African proverb holds that two lions cannot rule the same valley, but this saying does not hold up according to the five times winner of the Dakar: *"Two top drivers in the same team is not always easy, but we get on really well with **Seb**. We are totally open and each one of us is free to go for the win, but it will also be very important to help each other out. If he is leading the race, I will help him if he needs and vice versa. We are not just talking about this Dakar, because we'll be team-mates until 2027, so it's very important to cooperate. **Seb** is also happy about my arrival because to have a good team you need at least two good drivers!"* **Mathieu Baumel**, the Qatari's co-pilot and long-time accomplice, gives another insight into the advantages of this association: *"This transitional period will lead us up to three wonderful years with Dacia. Today, the idea is to start working together with the engineers, mechanics and also our team-mates. It will allow us to work differently. Instead of taking risks all alone over a fortnight of racing, we will be able to share the work. For **Nasser** and I, it's a big change, because we were always on our own with Toyota. We didn't have team-mates capable of taking command of the race for a day to pull us along in their wake. We had to drive fast, find the right strategy, avoid any mishaps and it was a pretty tough job to handle".*

BARREDA IS BACK!

“Bang Bang”, the record holder for stage victories on the Dakar among active competitors, wore the slogan “last shot” on his helmet last year, whilst riding a Honda on the fringes of the HRC team. The Spaniard, who crashed out of the race on stage 9 with a back injury, but not before having increased his collection of stage wins to 29, is making a second surprise comeback, this time with Hero MotoSports, a team in which rider number 88 will renew acquaintance with **Wolfgang Fischer**, the manager who recruited him in 2012 and then moved him on to Honda. **Joan Barreda** has been put in charge of training the Indian team’s riders as well as being tasked with developing the bike. The stage victory collector has never left the Dakar empty-handed since 2012 but is remaining cautious when discussing his ambitions: *“I feel good, but there are questions that need answering after a year without competition and with the prospect of all these days on the bike to come. My mental strength is still as strong, but let’s see where I’m at by the end of the first day. One and a half months ago I started to feel pain in my back again, so I hope I’ll be able to deal with it”*.

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR?

David Castera has flagged up two stone-dominated days that will rock the competitors: stage 1 the day after tomorrow on the way from AIUla to El Henakiyah with *“150 km of rocks in the middle of the special which could cause some damage,”* and stage 11 on 18th January, for the return to AIUla, during which the race will return to the area crossed by stage 2 of the Dakar in 2023, which was a black day for the Prodrive team! Having run out of spare wheels after repeated punctures, from the outset **Sébastien Loeb** and **Guerlain Chicherit** lost almost one and a half hours for the former and more than three hours for the latter. Punctures will be a major challenge on some days on the Dakar, on which having team-mates as back-up will be vital, since it could prove to be the only solution to find a spare wheel in working order. In such a case, the thirteen Hilux cars driven under the colours of Toyota Gazoo Racing and Overdrive Racing should have a certain competitive edge compared to the three Audis. Prodrive will also be able to approach this edition with greater serenity, thanks to the seven Hunters taking part this year, as opposed to four in 2023. However, as **Sébastien Loeb** was quick to point out, *“that doesn’t mean they’ll stop to help out,”* especially on a first stage where there will be everything to play for. That said, a new feature will have to be taken into account. Since the Rallye du Maroc, the official teams mentioned have all been equipped with the new BF Goodrich KDR 3 tyres, which are more versatile than the previous version and especially boast reinforced blanks, specifically designed to limit the number of punctures. Last October, Loeb admitted that: *“a genuine step forward has been made”*. The competitors, spectators and viewers will have a better idea of what is in store in 48 hours’ time, once the rally has made it through the terrain of volcanic rocks that have been awaiting the race for thousands of years.

GUERLAIN CHICHERIT: “WE HAVE A CHANCE TO SHINE”

Guerlain Chicherit, 10th on the Dakar 2023 in a Prodrive Hunter with which he won two stages, will be tackling the race this year behind the wheel of a Hilux that he was able to get to grips with on the Rallye du Maroc. However, on the Dakar the Frenchman will be starting out in the brand-new EVO+ version, just like his joint team-leader **Yazeed Al Rajhi**: *“We already almost ended up together in 2010, when he had a Hummer and was looking for a team-mate. I didn’t have the required budget at the time, but I get on really well with him. We should have a good shot at the race because our Hilux cars are reliable and quick. As for the competition, the three Audis are very quick and are driven by three great drivers, but are they as reliable as Toyota? Seb’s and Nasser’s Prodrive Hunters will also be very quick. I know the car very well; it had some teething problems to start with, some of which can sometimes drag on. We have a chance to shine. There are still two drawbacks. The first is that I’ll be discovering the behaviour of the car, which on first glance has changed a lot in driving terms, so I’ll need to get some kilometres under my belt to be able to adapt. The other thing is that even though it seems that the EVO+ has covered plenty of kilometres in South Africa, it hasn’t been involved in much racing. It would have been good to try it out in Morocco before arriving in Saudi Arabia”*.

PRICE WILL NOT BE GIVING ANYTHING AWAY

“2023 was a good season, but I came up just short several times”: 43 seconds (an unprecedentedly small gap), to be precise, from winning the Dakar 2023, behind **Kevin Benavides**, and only 4 points on the W2RC from beating his brother, **Luciano Benavides**. **Toby Price** will therefore be starting his 10th Dakar wearing number 2. In the shadow of the two men of the year, the two times winner (in 2016 and 2019) is nevertheless still highly rated in AIUla. *“After the Dakar, which was a tough pill to swallow, a mechanical problem took victory out of my hands in the W2RC,”* explains the Australian. *“But that’s motorsport. That said, I’m confident, I won the Rallye du Maroc and I hope to get things back on track, by changing number 2 to number 1”*. Price will be wearing the same Orange coloured KTM overalls as the older Benavides brother, who has not shown as much consistency. The winner of the Dakar 2023 fractured his femur several weeks after his triumph and was unable to take part in the second leg of the W2RC in Abu Dhabi. After the Sonora Rally, a broken wrist deprived him of the last two legs to be contested. On 3rd December, during pre-Dakar training with his team, he fractured his fibula. However, these injuries have not challenged the mindset of **Kevin**, who during his recovery has been the best placed to analyse the progression of his brother **Luciano**. *“I simply twisted my leg on a bend and I fractured my fibula,”* explains the unlucky title holder. *“I had to have an operation and it became a different race for me, to be ready for the start of the rally here. I’m in a good physical state in general, my leg isn’t too bad and I’m reassured by the tests we have done with the bike on the shake down. It’s true, it’s not the best way to approach the beginning of the rally, but I’ve had to deal with a lot of adversity in 2023 and each time I’ve learned something new about myself. I’m treating the Dakar as an opportunity to turn the tables. As for **Luciano**, he took advantage of last year to improve the mental side of his riding, because winning isn’t only about being fast”*.

A COMEBACK FOR “NANI” AND A DEBUT FOR FORD

Joan “Nani” Roma, winner of the Dakar 2004 on a bike and then in a car in 2014, will be celebrating the 10th and 20th anniversaries of his successes tomorrow by starting the prologue behind the wheel of a Ford M-Sport Ranger. The pick-up will get its first taste of the rally-raid on Saudi soil to open the chapter of the American brand’s presence on the Dakar as well as a new volume of **Nani’s** life: *“Simply being here again in a team like Ford M-Sport is already a massive personal victory, so anything else that happens will just be a bonus. Normally, after a cancer like I had, your sporting career is over. In March 2022, I asked how long I had left to live and the doctor replied that he had solutions with an 80% to 90% chance of success. It’s something we’re totally unused to hearing as competitors. Beforehand, if I got an injury, the talk was of how long it would take to get back to competing, but in that case we were talking about saving my life. I approached it in the same way as I would prepare for a race: understanding the illness, discussing with professionals about the side effects so I could be prepared for them and that’s what helped me to face up to and accept the illness. Doing the chemotherapy was the hardest thing I’ve had to do in my life, but each day I suffered, the goal of getting back into a car helped me. Ford knew that I was fighting against the illness and simply asked me if I thought I would be ready for September and the first tests. In a competitive world like ours, it’s a very rare attitude. What really interested me was the project to build a state-of-the-art car. Ford have been smart enough to come and check out just how complex the rally-raid discipline is by taking part in the Dakar this year. At present, I’m pushing the car as hard as it allows me to. I’m not expecting anything more, but on the Rallye du Maroc, that got us onto the podium”*.

48 HOURS AGAINST THE CLOCK: HOW IT WORKS

To complete the first week of the race, a new stage format has been invented over two days, plunging the riders and drivers into a unique experience in the heart of the Empty Quarter. Setting off from Shubaytah, separate specials have been prepared for the bikes/quads and cars/trucks: 620 km to be covered over two days for the former and 570 km for the others. As regards the FIM competitors, a

specific rule has been drawn up for the Rally GP riders, who will start out in reverse order of the previous day's ranking. In this vast desert of dunes, seven very basic bivouacs spread over six geographical points will be set up to welcome the riders and drivers. They will be obliged to stop as soon as they reach one of them once the cut-off time of 16.00 has passed. On site, they will be given an allowance of 6 litres of water, a tent, a floor mat, a sleeping bag and a survival ration. Furthermore, these "rest zones" are totally isolated in terms of connections and telephone networks: the leading riders and drivers will have few clues as to the performances of their rivals! The following day at dawn, the competitors will start at one-minute intervals in the order they arrived at the bivouac. A further subtlety is that the starting points are shared by all the categories, so the bikes and cars will start the special alternately, at 30-second intervals. For the leading competitors, they may only have around one hundred kilometres to complete, on which the bonuses for bikers opening the way will be increased to 1.5 seconds per kilometre, in order to decrease the advantage that a rider may have been tempted to take the day before by slowing before entering the rest zone in order to start the next day in second place rather than out in front, for example. On the return to Shubaytah, the riders and driver will finally be able to await the finishes of their rivals to discover whether their performance has been good or bad in terms of the general rankings. A plane will then take them to Riyadh, where they will at last be able to rest!

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