

AlUla, January 3rd 2024

D-2: HISTORY IN THE MAKING IN ALULA

Key points:

- *The riders and crews of the 2024 Dakar, gathered on a sprawling "Start Camp" just outside the ancient city of AlUla, are gearing up for the start of the rally on Friday, 5 January. A 29-kilometre prologue will be the on-ramp to a route that the race director, David Castera, has described as gruelling from the beginning. The three-time winner René Metge (1981, 1984 and 1986), who passed away today at age 82, would have loved it.*
- *In the run-up to the great duel in the desert, the competitors and their vehicles are going through the usual technical and administrative scrutineering over two days. However, the budding talent Mason Klein is stuck in a limbo because his motorbike was held up in transit from China.*
- *The favourites for the various titles were presented at a press conference held to mark the launch of the 2024 World Rally-Raid Championship season, in which the watchmaker Rebellion has joined the W2RC as a new partner and official timekeeper. A new clash between Nasser Al Attiyah and Sébastien Loeb is on the cards in the car race.*
- *The pretenders to the crown in each category of the 46th Dakar were invited to show their ambition ahead of their two-week confrontation in Saudi Arabia. The snapshot shows a new generation of champions breaking through, with rising stars such as Eryk Goczał (Challenger) and Seth Quintero (Ultimate) shifting into gear.*

DAVID CASTERA: "SOME WILL SAY THE START IS TOO TOUGH"

When **David Castera** warned the 2024 Dakar entrants that this was going to be "the toughest edition in Saudi Arabia", it was no idle threat. The race director points out that there will be three gruelling highlights that will put man and machine to the test. The first one will come right after the prologue: "The first three days will be true Dakar specials. There will be no respite. Make no mistake, I want the competitors to know what we have in store for them. Some will say the start is too tough, but you can't please everyone". After taking a battering —or not— in this high-intensity sequence, the competitors will have to muster their strength again to tackle an unprecedented and physically demanding end to the first week in the Empty Quarter. "Never before has the Dakar featured 600 km of dune-surfing in two days. The top motorbike riders will be riding flat out for almost eight hours, a challenge they've never faced before. It's going to be a true test of concentration, endurance and stamina. I hope the top cars also get stuck. It would be fun, they should struggle a bit too". Even after this formidable obstacle, the maze of difficulties put together by **Castera** has a sting in the tail: "Stage 11 will take us back to the terrain of last year's stage 2, where the cars suffered a flurry of punctures. We did that on purpose. It was too selective for stage 2, last year, but it might sow chaos and spice up the end of the rally. I wanted an open scenario before the finish."

MASON KLEIN ALREADY RACING AGAINST THE CLOCK

The 2022 Dakar breakout star who stormed to ninth place and top rookie honours in his debut has been unable to shake off the chaos that plagued his 2023 season. After a crash knocked him out of the Dakar in January 2023, the American was left without a ride for the rest of the season. Even his victory at the Rally dos Sertões in Brazil last summer did not change his fortunes. In autumn, he was planning to enter his third Dakar in the Original by Motul class, as a privateer... when he received a call from the Chinese

manufacturer Kove. It was not a works deal, but with his own squad, KORR —which stands for "Klein Off Road Racing". However, this last-minute solution is not going to plan. Klein's motorbike is still stranded in Dubai, where it was delayed by customs. A van departed the bivouac this morning to retrieve it from the Emirates, so near yet so far! Klein can only sit and wait as the clock ticks down. There are three possibilities on the table: crossing his fingers for his motorbike to arrive before the technical scrutineering closes tomorrow afternoon; which would be the best-case scenario; jumping on a works Kove, which would leave one of the Chinese riders out of the Dakar, an option that the American refuses to contemplate; or finding a KTM in the bivouac and reverting to his old mount at the eleventh hour, which is his plan B. "We spent many hours preparing the bike, a brand-new model that has never been seen before. We spent about a hundred hours over two or three weeks. I checked every bolt, greased everything, Dad and I did everything. The bike is awesome, I'm very pleased with its power, it's amazing. I don't want to ride any other bike. Maybe I'll start on a KTM, who knows? I'm here, everything is paid for, I just need a bike. Finishing is not my goal, I came here to get a result, that's what I enjoy. It's hard mentally. I hope we can get it back in time."

RENÉ METGE, A DAKAR WARRIOR THROUGH AND THROUGH

The AIUla bivouac was shaken this afternoon by news of the passing of the 82-year-old **René Metge**. He was a Dakar legend from the age of the pioneers who won the event three times (1981, 1984 and 1986) before becoming its director (1987–88) and dreaming up numerous adventures that transported rally raid fans to faraway lands, including Paris–Moscow–Beijing (1992) and the Trans-oriental Rally (2008). **René Metge** is best known for his exploits with Porsche, but **David Castera** will treasure the memories of him as an organiser: "I'll remember him as an artist, an enthusiast who wanted to share his passion. I entered my first major rally, Paris–Beijing, with him in 1992. He was able to take people where no one had gone before. It goes without saying that he was a source of inspiration for me". **Metge** continued to share his passion in the Dakar by bringing **Johnny Hallyday** to the tracks and dunes of Africa in 2002, as well as the journalist **Bernard Chevalier** and the readers of *L'Équipe* from 2004 to 2006. For his last participation, in 2007, he teamed up with **Yvan Müller**, then an ice racing specialist. His legacy lives on in the 2024 Dakar, where two Dakar Classic crews —the reigning champions **Juan Morera-Lidia Ruba** and the French pair **Frédéric Larre-Jérémy Athimon**— will be racing in replicas of his 1986 Porsche 959. The Dakar teams extend their condolences to his daughter **Élodie**, who was his co-driver in 2003, and the rest of his loved ones.

TOYOTA (ALSO) PLAYING THE YOUTH CARD

Overdrive Racing and Toyota Gazoo Racing have no shortage of experienced drivers capable of picking up the win after two weeks of racing, such as **Giniel de Villiers**, **Yazeed Al Rajhi** and **Guerlain Chicherit**, who are revving up for the battle for the title. However, these teams are also looking to the future, with three lads under 24 behind the wheel of Hiluxes, keen to make their mark in the sport in the short to medium term. **Juan Cruz Yacopini** is already on his fourth Dakar, but now with a strong résumé that includes third place in the W2RC last season. The Argentinian sounds wise beyond his years after taking seventh place in the previous edition: "I have a better picture of my abilities following a W2RC season in which I gained confidence and speed. There'll be a lot of dunes and I like that, it should give me an edge over those who'll be tackling them for the first time". It feels strange to call **Seth Quintero** a rookie because, at the tender age of 21, he has almost as many Dakar stage wins under his belt (20 in three editions) as candles on his birthday cake. Untouchable in the T3 category, where he earned his stripes with the W2RC title, the American is taking his promotion to the top class seriously: "I'm totally new to the world of T1+, where I've never raced before. The dream would be to win the rally, but I have to be realistic, finishing is the goal. I think we showed we had the pace by taking the fight to **Nasser Al Attiyah** at Baja Dubai, which was amazing. If we can pull it off again, we'll see how it goes in the second week". Meanwhile, the "baby" of the team is just old enough to enter the race. In fact, **Saood Variawa** is probably the youngest ever competitor in a top car. A son of **Shameer Variawa**, who started

the Dakar twice and now runs the company that develops the Hilux T1+ cars, Saood cut his teeth on the circuit, but he has already scored a podium in a round of South African GT Racing with **De Villiers** and **Lategan**: "The gift my father gave me is a dream come true. Being on a works team at 18 is insane. I'm very young and my experience in a rally-raid car is only seven months, so I have no pressure. It's the best way to start the Dakar".

THE TIME BONUSES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

The motorbike race has had a bonus system in place since the last edition to mitigate the disadvantage of the rider who leads the way in the special, i.e. the winner of the previous stage. As the first rider on the road, he has to navigate without any tracks and usually drops time to his pursuers. Previously, time bonuses were handed out in sections to the top three riders, with up to 1.5 seconds per kilometre over the relevant distances. This year, the bonuses will go to the first rider and, where applicable, the whole group he is riding with if the other competitors in the group are within 15 seconds. Furthermore, the amount has been fixed at 1 s/km and applies to all the riders in the group, still in sections, but spanning almost the entire length of the specials. The riders already liked the original scheme, but they like the revamped version even better, as **Adrien Van Beveren**, one of the main entrants who stand to benefit from it, explained: "During the W2RC season, I saw that it didn't work for all courses. The bonuses are mainly useful when you're off-track. I think it's the right move to decrease the bonus reward and I also think it's great to give it only to the first rider and those around him. It will make the race safer by removing the incentive to try and be first at all costs. From a mental point of view, it encourages us to help each other with the navigation and avoid coming to blows!"

A NEW HONDA TO RESTORE OLD GLORIES

Honda returned to the Dakar in 2013 after a 24-year hiatus, using the first edition to gather data before rolling out the first CRF 450 Rally, developed by HRC, in 2014. A decade later, the second generation, still a 100% factory machine, powers the Monster Energy Honda factory riders, except for **Tosha Schareina**, the newcomer to the group. **Pablo Quintanilla**, who has been part of the development from day one, describes the motorbike as "lighter, easier to handle, with more torque and power, which makes it easier to tackle technical sections and dunes". Like KTM, with its latest Factory evolution since the 2022 Dakar, this result came at the expense of stability. Has Honda struck the right balance to repeat the 2020 and 2021 victories by **Ricky Brabec** and **Kevin Benavides**? That is certainly the hope of the two-time world manufacturers' champion in both the Dakar and the W2RC since 2022.

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