

Shubaytah, January 12<sup>th</sup> 2024

## LOEB, VAN BEVEREN, GIROUD, DE SOULTRAIT: VIVE LA FRANCE

### FOCUS

Not everyone is equally equipped to deal with the Empty Quarter. The programme for the second part of the 48 HR chrono stage was again sandy, but the portions of dunes could vary greatly in their dimensions. Consequently, four bikers spent the night at rest point A in the company of fifty cars and trucks, meaning they still had to tackle 425 km (FIM) and 354 km (FIA) of sandy peaks and troughs in order to complete the first week of the Dakar. In the meantime, the elite riders and drivers had reached the bivouac reserved for them, namely point F, from which there remained only 112 km (FIM) and 71 km (FIA) to be completed. At the finishing line, the stage victories were swept up by four French competitors, which is a first in the rally's history. Nevertheless, an American, **Ricky Brabec**, and a Spaniard, **Carlos Sainz**, will begin the second week of the Dakar in the lead of the bike and car categories.

### OUTLINE

It is often said that the Dakar teaches life lessons. The one dispensed by the 48-hour stage surely relates to the virtues of perseverance in the pursuit of goals. The soft sand was very harsh on **Pablo Quintanilla** yesterday, and today's recipients of this lesson demonstrated through their actions that they are in tune with the demands of the rally-raid discipline. **Ricky Brabec**, who has been consistent since the start in AIUla, displayed his solidity and avoided any mistakes on the return journey to Shubaytah, allowing him to take the lead in the general rankings and keep on hoping to pick up a second title after his first in 2020. On the 48-hour exercise, **Adrien Van Beveren** was able to show that, in a way, he has sand in his blood: his victories on the Enduropale du Touquet, but also on the Enduro del Verano in Argentina, have forged his technique and a physique that make him almost untouchable in the sand. The efforts expended to acquire such control have given him one of the finest rewards in his career with today's success, as well as the perspective of participating in the battle for outright victory.

It almost seemed obvious that in the battle within the Empty Quarter, **Yazeed Al Rajhi** and **Nasser Al Attiyah**, true children of the dunes, would have a head start on the other competitors. After the general rankings leader rolled and trashed his Hilux, the five times winner's display was doubly astonishing on what was supposed to be a stage that seemed tailor-made for him, firstly when he got stuck in the sand yesterday and, secondly, by losing 2 hours 45 minutes in total following mechanical problems today (See a crushing blow). As for the Audis, they completed the major challenge of the Empty Quarter with distinction, because **Carlos Sainz** and **Mattias Ekström** emerged from it in the top two places of the general rankings. Immediately behind them in the race hierarchy, **Sébastien Loeb** won a prestigious stage to put himself in a favourable position to win: with a deficit of 29 minutes on the Spanish leader that is probably not insurmountable and with an illustrious colleague in the person of **Al Attiyah** to help him hunt down the title he has dreamed of winning since 2016.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

There is clearly a before and after 48 HR chrono in the truck race. While the battle for outright victory seemed to boil down to a duel between **Janus van Kasteren** and **Aleš Loprais**, with a slight advantage for the Dutchman, **Martin Macík** used the two days spent in the Empty Quarter as a veritable springboard. Up to that point, the Czech driver had been limited in expressing his talent by several penalties as well as a number of punctures. However, on stage 6 he produced a faultless performance and it was the two leaders' turn to fall foul of misfortune. In the end, he picked up his tenth stage victory on his twelfth participation on the Dakar and more importantly took out a serious option on outright victory. With a lead of 1 hour and 16 minutes over his countryman **Aleš Loprais**, he can look forward to a different future on Friday 19th January.

## A CRUSHING BLOW

Today's menu comprised 71 kilometres of dunes, or in other words the portion **Nasser Al Attiyah** gobbles up for breakfast each morning. For the Qatari driver, it could even have been seen as an opportunity to slightly reduce the deficit he conceded yesterday. However, nothing went according to plan for the five times winner of the Dakar, who was brought to a standstill after 530 km, due to a broken steering arm on the hub carrier of his vehicle... or, in layman's terms, a smashed up front left wheel on his Hunter. He had to wait for his team's assistance truck in order to repair and resume the route to the finishing line, where he was left to count the cost in the general rankings. With a sixth title now out of reach, maybe it will be a time for "**Nasser Al Attack**" to reappear on the 2024 edition, on which he has the firm intention of picking up as many points as possible for the rest of the W2RC season. However, he will have to combine this collecting of points with his new role of lieutenant to his former rival **Sébastien Loeb**. In the match against the Audis that is brewing, the support that he aims to provide to the Frenchman could prove to be decisive, especially in the case where **Loeb** also has difficulty in looking after his machine.

## STAT OF THE DAY

The French contingent played its cards right at the finishing line of the first 48 HR Chrono stage in the history of the Dakar thanks to its quad aces. When it came to showdown, **Adrien Van Beveren** was the first card turned over with the fourth success of his career on the Dakar. Next came **Sébastien Loeb**, who finished ahead of **Carlos Sainz**, becoming the first car driver to win more than one stage on this Dakar and in so doing increased his collection of stage wins to 25, to draw equal with **Hiroshi Masuoka**, the sixth most victorious driver in the category. In the quad race, double title holder **Alexandre Giroud** managed to maintain a lead of 25" over his rival **Manuel Andújar** to snatch victory. Over almost 10 hours of special, that amounts to no more than 450 m, which goes to show how close the duel is between the two men! Finally, **Xavier de Soultrait** won for the third time on the 46th edition of the Dakar in the SSV category, behind the wheel of his Polaris bearing the colours of SLR, **Loeb's** team. Apart from stage 1 when he exercised caution and stage 3 when he suffered gearbox problems, the Frenchman has been on the podium every day. Never in the history of the Dakar have there been 4 French winners on the same stage. If that is not enough, then **Jean-Loup Lèpan**, who achieved the best time in the Rally 2 class, also deserves a special mention, as he dethroned his countryman Roman Dumontier from the top of the general rankings. Vive la France!

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Nasser Al Attiyah: "I will do my best for Seb to win because we are a team"**

**Nasser Al Attiyah** suffered mechanical problems 50 km from the finish of stage six and has lost 2 hours and 40 minutes to see his chances of obtaining a sixth triumph on the Dakar go up in smoke. The Qatari driver's only ambition now is to try and secure as many points as possible for the championship and to help his team-mate **Sébastien Loeb**. *"It was not a good day. On the last 50 kilometres we broke the steering and we couldn't do anything to repair. We waited for our assistance truck to come, we fixed it and then got to the finish. We'll try to keep going and we'll see what we can do. It was good opening yesterday, but it was not easy, we knew we'd lost time, but it was more or less perfect and we were happy, but then on the last 50 km we broke the steering. Everything is not finished, but now we'll try to play for the world championship. I will also try to help **Seb**, to be behind him. At least he can win this Dakar. I will do my best for him to win because we are a team".*

## THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

On the fringes of the battle between the leaders that once again took place today between the Škoda driven by **Ondřej Klymčiw** and the Toyota driven by **Carlos Santaolalla Milla**, the Defender manned

by **Maxence Gublin** and **Anthony Sousa** got involved in the fight. Having won the navigation tests, the Frenchmen's Land Rover displayed its original instincts. Following two participations in Africa, in 1991 first of all before Paris- Cape Town the following year, this Land Rover also ventured across to South America in 2005. It has never before reached the finish and its resuscitators firmly intend to set the record straight on the Dakar Classic. A first step in this direction was made today by this Defender which belongs to the 14 Iconic vehicles still in the race, vehicles that have already received the technical scrutineering stamp of approval on the Dakar before 2000. There are four Land Rovers this year, made up of two Defenders and two Range Rovers. After victory on the first edition of the Dakar in 1979, the British brand has not yet distinguished itself on the Dakar Classic. A fitting tribute to **Génestier's** inaugural success and **René Metge's** repeat performance two years later would be the least they could do!

## WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

### Number 5 for Eryk Goczał

**Eryk Goczał** is not a rookie like the others in the Challenger class. One year after becoming the youngest winner on the Dakar, by winning the SSV category at the age of 18 years, he is authoritatively dominating proceedings in his new category. The Polish rising star won his fifth special of the year in the Empty Quarter. Fifth was also his place in the overall car rankings for the stage, among the powerful T1 vehicles in the Ultimate class. He even had time to spare a thought for his father **Marek** during the two days, worried about the mechanical problems he had suffered. In the general rankings, **Goczał** junior already has a lead of one hour over his closest pursuer, **Mitch Guthrie**. Having devoted himself to his studies in 2023, he was not able to take part in the remainder of the W2RC after the Dakar. This year, he has the firm intention of completing the season and writing his name into the history books once again (why not?) by becoming, at the tender age of 19 years, the youngest winner of a rally-raid world title...

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