

Hail, January 15th 2024

OUT OF THE FIGHT FOR GLORY, BUT STILL FIGHTING TODAY!

FOCUS

Today, the rally headed to Ha'il, the cradle of all-terrain sport in Saudi Arabia, where the first generations of the country's riders and drivers learned their trade, setting out on the seventh stage from Al Duwadimi. The day's special was interrupted by a long transfer and the two-part menu for the stage put the riders, drivers and crews in two contrasting environments. On this stage of two halves, with 279 kilometres against the clock, the competitors first did battle on a thick layer of sand, sometimes in the form of dunes, but not always off-piste. For the last hundred or more kilometres before the finish, the contest concluded on fast tracks with several rocky portions, requiring plenty of watchfulness. This terrain was a familiar one for the **Benavides** brothers, who produced the best two times in the bike category. The common ground that they share with **Mattias Ekström** and **Stéphane Peterhansel**, who gave Audi a one-two finish on the stage, is that they have all lost any hope of overall triumph in Yanbu.

OUTLINE

They arrived in AlUla with legitimately loftier ambitions. Title holder **Kevin Benavides** and world champion **Luciano Benavides** both saw any perspectives of triumph disappear into the distance during the first week of the race. It is not yet totally out of the question for the KTM rider, who, with his stage victory in Ha'il, has climbed up to 5th place in the general rankings, 20 minutes nevertheless behind **Ricky Brabec**, but it is very unlikely for his younger brother on a Husqvarna, in 8th position, trailing by almost 40 minutes. Following 2023, on which the Argentinean siblings left their mark, in Ha'il they accomplished a first family one-two in their careers on the Dakar, as consolation for not occupying the leading roles as they had hoped. Ahead of them, the thrilling battle is well and truly underway between the big shots in the category. In view of the intermediate rankings during the stage, it is reasonable to think that the strategy of applying the brakes served as a benchmark for the title contenders. Having led for most of the special, the American general rankings leader finally finished with the 7th best time, putting him in an advantageous starting position for tomorrow's stage, while **Ross Branch** went one step better with 8th place. **Adrien Van Beveren**, who sensed the problem a little too late, inherited 3rd place which may not do him any good when all his Honda colleagues will be hot on his heels on the way to AlUla. **Stéphane Peterhansel** and **Mattias Ekström** also began the Dakar dreaming of lifting the trophy in Yanbu. Their hopes were respectively crushed in the Empty Quarter and on yesterday's stage, but today they scored a one-two finish for Audi with many benefits, notably putting their road captain **Carlos Sainz** in a good position for rest of the rally (see Performance of the day). The Spaniard will still be wary of a comeback from **Sébastien Loeb**, even if the Frenchman lost an opportunity to close in on the general rankings leader following a navigation mistake that led to a 5 kilometre detour in the Saudi countryside. *"We lost almost all that we gained yesterday"* is a phrase that could aptly sum up the life of **Loeb** on the Dakar in recent years. He now needs a run a run of four days without making a single mistake if he hopes to dislodge his rival from the lead. In the fight for the rest of the places, **Guerlain Chicherit** enjoyed the best performance, climbing from 8th to 6th place in the general rankings and forming a sequence of four Toyotas, behind **Lucas Moraes** (3rd), **Guillaume de Mevius** (4th) and **Giniel de Villiers** (5th), who are pursuing the **Sainz/Loeb** duo at a distance.

In the Challenger class, **Mitch Guthrie** boasts a sufficiently thick time cushion over **Cristina Gutiérrez** to not need to Hoover up every second and minute. It is perhaps this context which enabled **Saleh Alsaif** to win for the first time in the category. In the SSV race, however, **Xavier de Soultrait** will be beginning

to look worriedly over his shoulder to see **João Ferreira** quickly approaching during this second week of the race: the Portuguese driver won today's special and now only trails the leader by 7'41". Calm most certainly reigns supreme in the cabin of **Martin Macík's** truck. His nearest pursuer is none other than young **Mitch van den Brink**, who already won his first stage last year at the age of 20 years and has once again tasted victory the day after his 22nd birthday.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

Audi has already twice put two of its RS Q e-tron cars on top of a Dakar stage podium before today. The first one-two finish achieved on stage 8 in 2021 was also accomplished by the duo of **Matthias Ekström** and **Stéphane Peterhansel**, before **'Peter'** and **Carlos Sainz** repeated the feat two days later. Today, the Swede became the leading Audi driver in terms of stage wins, now boasting a total of four, moving beyond **'El Matador's'** three successes and **'Mister Dakar's'** two. In total, since the constructor began participating in the rally, Audi has triumphed on nine stages. Today's success lifts the spirits of its architects, the day after the Swedish driver's mishaps, as **Peterhansel** explained at the finish of the special. Beyond this consolation prize, he was thinking of the delicate position of the four-ring brand, whose eggs are all in the same basket, because this one-two finish that helped forget the previous days is also strategic for the days to come. The Spaniard, who still leads the general rankings with **Sébastien Loeb** hot on his heels, is heading to Yanbu in his Audi in "go fast" mode, with two cars to open for him. This configuration offers multiple options for getting the boss there safely!

A CRUSHING BLOW

Yasir Seaidan has been a fundamental part of promoting Saudi sporting prowess on the rally (see Stat of the day) by winning stage 3 in the SSV category, the first of his career on his seventh participation in the Dakar. Then, for three consecutive days, the Saudi driver climbed onto the stage podium in his category and led the SSVs at the end of the 48 HR Chrono stage. After dropping down into second position in the general rankings on the following stage, only 7'30" behind the leader, the MMP driver experienced a black day today. He broke his front differential then had three punctures, leading to a loss of time totalling 27'39" at the end of the day, putting the 46-year-old driver and his French co-pilot **Adrien Metge** in 5th position in the category, more than half an hour behind the leader. However, this will not discourage the real estate agent from Riyadh, who began the race on the evening of stage 1 with almost one hour of time lost. **Yasir** knows better than most that construction of any project requires persistence.

STAT OF THE DAY

10. This 46th edition of the Dakar has highlighted the talent of the Saudi representatives, boasting a total of ten victories in all the categories combined since they started taking part in the Dakar. **Yasir Seaidan** distinguished himself on the third stage, gaining his first win, while **Saleh Alsaif** added a fifth success to his roll of honour on the world's most prestigious rally-raid. **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, despite a premature exit this year, has already tasted victory four times and even led the general rankings from the third to the fifth stage in the Ultimate category. **Dania Akeel**, who enjoyed a promising start to the stage in the Challenger class, recorded the best time at the first intermediate point before dropping down the rankings to finish 37 minutes behind her countryman. However, the race is far from finished... **Akeel**, and others too, still hope to write their names into the Dakar's history books.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Carlos Sainz: "You can see how easy it is to lose five or ten minutes on this race".

At the top of all the time checks today, Carlos Sainz made up the time he lost to Loeb yesterday and now has a lead of nearly 25 minutes over the Frenchman in the general rankings. However, the three-times Dakar winner isn't claiming victory just yet.

"I think there's still a long way for me and there are long stages to come. You can see how easy it is to lose five or ten minutes on this race. It's so easy, due to navigation, punctures, everything... It's very stressful. But it was all good today".

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

There were fifteen trucks at the start of the 4th edition of the Dakar Classic and the MAN 18-985 of the Italian team Motortecnica is currently the best placed. In 12th place overall, this behemoth is driven by a man who is in the thrall of the Dakar. **Corrado Pattono** has been competing on the Dakar for two decades now. For many of these veterans, the Dakar Classic is like a second life that starts again on the Dakar!

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

Ferreira's experience shines through

Following a broken steering rod at the start of the rally, **João Ferreira** has since busied himself with closing the gap separating him from **Sara Price** (South Racing Can-Am) and Yasir Seidan (MMP). Today, the Portuguese driver has succeeded, with a win that allowed him to take command in the championship rankings for the category. Climbing and descending the rungs on the category ladder sums up João's history in the rally-raid discipline, for he has not hesitated since his debut in 2019, and first attempt in the T2 class, to try out all the categories before finding his place behind the wheel of an SSV. Following the T1 class in 2021, behind the wheels of a Toyota Hilux and Mini X-raid, as well as the T3 class last year with Yamaha X-raid, he finally settled on an SSV for the Rallye du Maroc in 2023 and obtained a place behind the wheel of a Can-Am Factory for this season. At the age of 23 years, he already finished 6th in the T3 class in 2023 and 7th in the SSV rankings thanks to his victorious attempt in Morocco. **Ferreira** arrives in the SSV category with a wide-ranging wealth of experience which is likely to count heavily in his favour this season.

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