

Al Duwadimi, January 7th 2024

"PETER" HITS THE BIG FIVE-OOOOOOOOOH!

FOCUS

The road to Al Duwadimi, which contained the first dune fields of this edition, set the riders and crews on a course to the geographical heart of Saudi Arabia. The dunes were not tough or numerous enough to shake up the standings; instead, the entrants had to put their navigational flair to good use to get out of one maze after another, in addition to marshalling their handling skills to overcome this 462 km long, globally fast special. Navigation happens to be the strong suit of **Nacho Cornejo**, who bagged his seventh career stage win, and **Stéphane Peterhansel**, who was once again off the charts with a performance that earned him his fiftieth car special!

OUTLINE

The tide of fate can turn in an instant in the Dakar, as we saw in stage 2. While **Ross Branch** managed to cling on to the overall lead, the other standout performer of yesterday's motorbike special will cry bitter tears tonight. **Mason Klein** running into mechanical trouble with his Kove seemed a matter of "when", not "if". Disaster struck at km 46, forcing the American to screech to a halt and spend two hours repairing his mount. His podium ambitions are dead and buried, but he remains in the race and could still pull a rabbit or two out of his hat on the road to Yanbu. **Nacho Cornejo**, no stranger to the places of honour, capitalised on his navigational acumen. Starting in third place, he soon linked up with **Ricky Brabec** and **Ross Branch** to form a well-oiled three-cog machine that crossed the finish line together and hoovered up the time bonuses at stake. The Chilean's seventh Dakar stage win propelled him to within 2'55" of the Botswanan leader as the highest-ranked of the three Hondas near **Branch**. The tide went out even further in the car race, a day after many of the movers and shakers of the sport had a ghoulish experience in the first stage. **Stéphane Peterhansel** bounced back from his 32-minute loss yesterday to claim his fiftieth stage win (see "Performance of the day") and put himself back in contention. Meanwhile, **Sébastien Loeb** started the day 23 minutes behind **Guillaume de Mevius**, but his finish within 29 seconds of "Peter" catapulted him to 4'47" from **Carlos Sainz**, the new sheriff in town. Experience carried the day, with **Nasser Al Attiyah**, also on the back foot yesterday, moving into more familiar reaches (seventh). The top 10 of the Ultimate class in Al Duwadimi features all the favourites, including the rising stars that shone yesterday, **Seth Quintero** (fourth) and **Guillaume de Mevius** (fifth).

The hierarchy is also starting to emerge in the Challenger class, where the **Goczal** family's three Taurus cars flexed their muscles. **Eryk**, still undefeated and still only 19, secured a new triumph and leads a Goczal whitewash on the provisional podium. Can-Am is back on top of the SSV race thanks to **Gerard Farrés**, who clinched the stage ahead of **Xavier de Soultrait** and is the new master of the overall, and the Portuguese **João Ferreira**, who came in third. **Janus van Kasteren** is still in control of the truck competition, but **Aleš Loprais** gave him a proper scare today by finishing within 6 seconds of the Dutchman.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

The nickname "Monsieur Dakar" suits the multiple record holder to a T. **Stéphane Peterhansel** won 14 editions of the rally, sometimes on a motorbike and sometimes in a car, between 1991 and 2021, and today he added a new record to his collection with his fiftieth car special, on par with **Ari Vatanen**. Throughout his two ultra-prolific careers, the Frenchman has accumulated a total of 83 stage wins. He is also the joint record holder of the motorbike category together with **Cyril Despres**, with 33 apiece.

The ultimate hunter is not one for statistics, but his performance today put smiles back on the faces of the Audi clan. **Peterhansel**, a fast, confident driver behind the wheel of the RS Q e-Tron, can go back on the offensive, not least because his teammate **Carlos Sainz** is perched at the top of the leader board and the third Audi driver is also firing on all cylinders (sixth overall). Everything seems to be falling into place for the German maker.

A CRUSHING BLOW

The motorbike title holder, **Kevin Benavides**, landed in the Start Camp at the end of a 2023 season that paled in comparison with his triumph last January. After the Dakar, a succession of three injuries kept him out of all the other rounds except the Sonora Rally, which turned into an excruciating ordeal. The two-time Dakar champion, who flew to Saudi Arabia a month after his latest fracture and with no recent competitive experience under his belt, stood eighth overall yesterday, over 15 minutes behind the leader. Today, the Albiceleste's repeated navigation errors relegated him to nineteenth place, almost 20 minutes back. **Benavides** now sits just outside the top 10, with a 23'50" deficit to **Ross Branch**. The time lost during these two stages will be a heavy burden for the rest of his eighth Dakar.

STAT OF THE DAY

10. Following his dominant performance yesterday, **Marcelo Medeiros** got off to a wobbly start on the road to Al Duwadimi. However, as so many riders and drivers like to say, *"it ain't over until it's over"*, and today the Brazilian showed that the old adage rings as true as ever. Lagging almost three minutes behind the leader at km 41, the odds were getting longer and longer, but **Medeiros** was not going down without a fight. He struck back with the fastest time at the second time check and never looked back, with the Slovak **Juraj Varga** as his closest pursuer 2'30" down. **Medeiros** soared to his tenth career stage win, pulling level with the winner of the last two editions, **Alexandre Giroud**, and another two-time champion, **Alejandro Patronelli** (2011 and 2012), as joint fourth in the all-time quad race ranking. Only **Ignacio Casale** (23 victories), the other half of the **Patronelli Bros.**, Marcos (18), and **Nicolás Cavigliasso** (12) have picked up more stage wins. Even though there are not enough stages in the rally for him to entertain hopes of becoming the record holder this year, second place is definitely within reach.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"It was good, very fast. We pushed from the beginning, but we broke a rear arm and we stopped for more than ten minutes to repair. I think it's a weak point of this car because Séb' broke the same arm yesterday. We'll try to speak with the team to fix the problems. I enjoy the car a lot, even with all the problems we had today and yesterday, we're still in the game, it's only twelve"minutes in the overall." - **Nasser Al Attiyah**

MISSION 1000

The Green Power Race Team project was concocted in Barcelona, but the man behind the handlebar of its fully electric motorbike is **Fran Gómez Pallas**, a Galician rider born in Venezuela 53 years ago. His eighth Dakar poses a unique challenge in the shape of Mission 1000: *"This project was designed for the Dakar. You could say it's a battery on two wheels. Since the rally got under way, we've always started fifth or sixth and finished fourth. This means that the rider is fast and the bike works well. The terrain, which changes from one day to the next, made us a bit apprehensive about the capacity of the battery, but we've already collected reams of data that we can use to improve the bike. At any rate, it's nice to see that the bike has so much oomph."*

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

Lidia Ruba, the victorious co-driver in the 2023 Dakar Classic, is showing her dogged determination in her third start, this time in a replica of the Porsche that **Jacky Ickx** drove in 1986. However, she will tell

anyone who listens that she would rather spend early January with her three children. According to her driver —and husband— **Juan Morera**, the only reason she agreed to enter was so that he did not end up with another co-driver who might not know how to handle him. The Spanish couple emerged victorious from the prologue, only for an electrical problem to send them careening down the standings yesterday. Even so, they won four out of six tests despite finishing the second and third tests empty-handed. Today's provisional results again mark them as the victors in four tests, this time out of five! **Lidia** will continue to keep a close eye on her husband and on the trophy.

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

The H Factor

The motorbike constructor duel is starting to take shape after two days of racing in Season 3 of the W2RC. **Ross Branch**, in command of the overall for the last two days, raised the white banner of the Indian squad in his role as team leader, aided by **Sebastian Bühler's** fourth place finish today. **Cornejo** netted Honda the stage win, but the red banner shines even prouder in the general standings, where **Nacho, Brabec** and **Quintanilla** rank second through fourth on their CRF 450 Rally motorbikes. It is the kind of teamwork that has already brought the reds two manufacturers' titles. Even so, the fresh recruit **Joan Barreda** could be just what Hero need to throw HRC into disarray. As "**Bang Bang**" chases his thirtieth stage win, it could be a good idea to start engraving the letter H on the FIM Manufacturers' Trophy to save time.

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More information: www.dakar.com

PRESS CONTACT: pressedakar@aso.fr