

Shubaytah, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2024

## "QUINTAFONDO" AND "NASSER AL ATTACK"

### FOCUS

As the name suggests, the Empty Quarter is not exactly teeming with conventional architectural or cultural tourist attractions. Yet, for rally-raid enthusiasts, it is a staggering treasure trove with dunes that stretch as far as the eye can see. Millions? Billions, perhaps? Who knows, it is hard to count while in the throes of sand fever. The riders and crews were even willing to jump out of their sleeping bags in the dead of night to tackle a 508 km road section and plunge into this sea of dunes for a pivotal 118 km special that set the stage for their stay in the Empty Quarter. **Pablo Quintanilla**, who cut his teeth in Chile's Atacama Desert, and **Nasser Al Attiyah**, who learned the ropes in the neighbouring sands of Qatar, turned up the heat today and added another notch to their belts.

### OUTLINE

It did not take a genius to figure out the right approach to the special among the top motorbike riders. The Rally GP starting order is flipped for the "48H Chrono" beginning tomorrow, so the biggest advantage will go to the latest starter among the 17 entrants still in contention in this class. **Adrien Van Beveren's** game plan seemed spot on, with an interesting fifth place at km 0 and a knack for surfing the dunes that gave him a realistic shot at the stage win. It was almost impossible for the Frenchman to lose. Almost. In the end, he was pipped at the post by just 37 seconds by his Monster Energy Honda teammate, **Pablo Quintanilla**. The Chilean notched up his eighth Dakar stage win and bagged the prime slot for stage 6A. In his twelfth appearance in the Dakar, where he has twice snagged the runner-up's spot (2020 and 2022), "**Quintafondo**", sixth overall at 26'47" back, will have the deck stacked in his favour, but he still needs to play his cards right to bump **Ross Branch** from the hot seat and emerge as the leader of the Honda squad, which has another three riders in hot pursuit of the Botswanan: **Cornejo** (second at 1'14"), **Brabec** (third at 3'47") and **Van Beveren** (fourth at 18'10").

It was a completely different story in the car race, with no unusual starting procedures lined up for tomorrow. Instead, the drivers will tackle a separate route, unable to benefit from tracks left by the motorbike riders. There was a palpable sense of concern among many of the favourites, with each crafting his own tactical recipe to fend off competitors looming in their rear-view mirror tomorrow morning. **Stéphane Peterhansel** and **Carlos Sainz**, for instance, played it cool to finish sixteenth and seventeenth in the Ultimate class, a mere 14 seconds apart. Time will tell if this was the right move. **Sébastien Loeb** went as far as to deliberately miss a waypoint, landing him a 15-minute penalty and widening his gap to the leader, **Yazeed Al Rajhi**, to a daunting 43 minutes. Talk about a gamble! Meanwhile, the Saudi front-runner did not tempt fate today, and neither did **Nasser Al Attiyah**, who dialled up his signature aggression when looking to make a statement. Over a distance of 118 km, he outpaced **Guerlain Chicherit** by 1'51" to nab his 48th stage win, which is also his first in a Hunter, adding to a diverse victory list that spans BMW, Volkswagen, Hummer, Jefferies Buggy, Mini and Toyota. That is a roster of seven different constructors, pulling level with "**Peter**" in the car category. **Al Attiyah** slotted into second place in the overall, trailing his former teammate **Yazeed Al Rajhi** by 9 minutes, and will lead the charge in the "48H Chrono" with gusto.

In the Challenger class, **Eryk Goczał** conceded over 2 minutes to today's victor, Francisco "**Chaleco**" López, in what did not seem like a calculated move, but his vice grip on the lead remains as tight as ever. **Gerard Farrés** suffered a debacle, tumbling in the dunes and dashing his title prospects. Meanwhile, **Xavier de Soultrait** claimed the stage, proving that his spectacular debut in his new class was no fluke. Finally, **Aleš Loprais** and **Janus van Kasteren's** troubles played right into the hands of **Martin Macík**, who took the stage win and is now sandwiched between the two hot favourites in the provisional top 3.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

What a comeback by "**Chaleco**"! In the 2024 Dakar, it seems like you need a Polish surname, preferably **Goczał**, to call the shots at the top of the Challenger class. Specifically, it is the latest scion of the family, **Eryk**, who has been hogging the limelight with four stage wins, including the prologue, and still reigns supreme in the overall. Yet today, the allure of sand and dunes brought back the "**Chaleco**" of old, the one who has won three trophies, two in the SSV class (2019 and 2021) and one in T3 (2022). Today, it appears that the Chileans shine brightest when they go on the offensive. Securing his 25th Dakar stage win (11 on motorbikes and 14 in SSV-Challenger), the Can-Am driver, who finished fifth in the class last year, beat Austin Jones by 2'04" to take Chile's 75th victory in the history of the rally.

### A CRUSHING BLOW

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### STAT OF THE DAY

6. Unlike his competitors, **Nasser Al Attiyah** did not try to play 4D chess today. The Qatari romped home with the fastest time, making it six different winners in as many specials this Dakar, after **Mattias Ekström** (prologue), **Guillaume de Mevius**, **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Lucas Moraes** and **Sébastien Loeb**. The last time that there were six different winners in the first six stages was 2004, a whopping 20 years (and 4 days, to be exact) ago. Back then, **Kenjiro Shinosuka**, **Josep Maria Servià**, **Giniel de Villiers**, **Ari Vatanen**, **Stéphane Peterhansel** and **Hiroshi Masuoka** took turns topping the charts between Clermont-Ferrand (France) and Tan-Tan (Morocco). All the work poured into making the 46th Dakar as unpredictable as possible is paying off!

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Nasser Al Attiyah: "There was no strategy on my part"**

Nasser Al Attiyah claimed his first stage win in this Dakar, which is also his 48th career victory and his first with Prodrive. This also means he will be opening the road in the "48H chrono" tomorrow. "There was no strategy on my part. I wanted to win the stage no matter what they have in store for us tomorrow. *"It's 600 kilometres long and I don't mind opening the road. Even if I lose time, what matters to me is finishing these 600 kilometres."*

### THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

**Ondřej Klymčiw**, locked in a tight battle with **Carlos Santaolalla** since stage 2, where the two standout performers of the fourth edition were separated by a mere point in favour of the Spaniard, may have just gained the upper hand today. In stage 3, the Toyota HDJ 80 driver gradually widened his lead, starting with an 8-point cushion, only to surrender one yesterday. However, today was a masterclass from the Škoda pilot. Sweeping all three tests of the day, he carved out a substantial lead, racking up dozens of points against his main rival. He bagged 10 points in the first test, 20 in the next and another 10 in the final one. **Ondřej** will be going to bed with a 29-point margin in the overall. Combined with two stage wins in his first three participations, his six victories so far in the fourth edition bring his tally to eight!

### WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

**Ebster, an Original by Motul in the motorbike top 10**

**Tobias Ebster**, leading the Original by Motul class in his Dakar debut, took a quantum leap today. Kinigadner's nephew clinched the Rally 2 special and cracked the top 10 overall! Ninth in the stage, the 26-year-old pizza delivery guy seems right at home tearing through the dunes. It was, after all, in the nearby sands of the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge that he put his name on the map in early 2023, when he grabbed the Rally 2 trophy and earned his ticket for this January by winning the Road to Dakar challenge. The Austrian has got two days left to flaunt his sand-shredding talent before heading to Yanbu and then defending his title back in Abu Dhabi. The W2RC is on the radar for **Ebster**, who is eager to make a splash as soon as he can.

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