

Al Duwadimi, January 14th 2024

THREE IS THE MAGIC NUMBER FOR CORNEJO AND LOEB

FOCUS

Leaving aside the lousy navigators out there who manage to stretch the course like a rubber band, covering more than 850 km in a Dakar stage is something that happens once in a blue moon. It has only happened once in Saudi Arabia, in today's return to competition on the road from Riyadh to Al Duwadimi, clocking in at a whopping 874 km, following the prescribed route to the letter. There was plenty of room to keep things interesting on this epic journey, especially in the 483 km timed section. Whether weaving through canyons, blasting through off-track stretches or tackling the heart of the dunes, entrants had to be a jack of all trades in this game. **Nacho Cornejo** —alert, inspired, nimble and focused— turned out to be a master of all trades, posting the fastest time of the day in the motorbike special. Meanwhile, **Sébastien Loeb** opened the road and never looked back, producing a virtuoso performance to clinch victory for the third time this year and crank up the heat on **Carlos Sainz**.

OUTLINE

The closer we get to the denouement of the Dakar, the more it is shrouded in suspense. M. Night Shyamalan-esque plot twists are far from guaranteed, but the 2024 edition seems tailor-made for the unexpected. In the fight for the stage wins, **Cornejo** triumphing in Al Duwadimi was certainly no shocker. The Chilean has pulled off this feat nine times in his career, three this year, including last Sunday, when the race headed to Al Duwadimi from AlUla. He also moved back onto the increasingly unpredictable overall podium. First, **Adrien Van Beveren** got nudged out. He paid the price for opening the road but remains a force to be reckoned with at a reasonable 14'39" from the lead. And, even more importantly, **Ricky Brabec's** lead is hanging by a thread, with **Ross Branch** overcoming a failing front brake to stubbornly defend his chances and close in to just 1 second (see "Stat of the day"). The lively Rally 2 race validates this impression. After **Romain Dumontier** in the Empty Quarter, today was **Jean-Loup Lèpan's** turn to lose the lead, thanks in no small part to a missed waypoint and the ensuing 15-minute penalty. As the tides of fate sweep in and out, it must be hard to feel safe even in one of the cutting-edge Ultimate cars. Today, **Mattias Ekström** got booted from the provisional podium (see "A crushing blow"), which is still dominated by **Carlos Sainz**, but for how long? **Sébastien Loeb** is a man on a mission to take the top spot: he bagged his third win of the season, much like **Cornejo**, and soared to second overall, 19 minutes from the summit. Although the Spaniard is a tough nut to crack, the approaching shadow of the nine-time world rally champion must be sending shivers down his spine. In these circumstances, **Lucas Moraes**, the second-fastest driver today and **Loeb's** closest rival in the overall, can still entertain hopes of winning the rally if a little miracle happens along the way (see "Performance of the day").

In the Challenger class, the disqualification of the **Goczals** for breaching the FIA Technical Regulations gave Mitch Guthrie a clear run to the lead, with **Cristina Gutiérrez** and "**Chaleco**" **López** 33 and 40 minutes back, respectively. In SSV, **João Ferreira** won the stage as **Xavier de Soultrait** rose to the top of the pecking order. Finally, in the truck race, **Martin Macík** picked up his third stage win on the trot and extended his overall lead to an hour and a half over fellow Czech **Aleš Loprais**.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

When **Lucas Moraes** finished on the podium of his first Dakar last year, the Brazilian became the first rookie to crack the top 3 of the car race since **Juha Kankkunen** won in 1988. It was the result of a striking level of consistency for a newbie. Aided by the self-elimination of contenders for the final podium, the Brazilian surfaced without making too many waves. Catapulted into the role of Toyota Gazoo Racing factory driver alongside **Seth Quintero**, without participating in any warm-up events on the W2RC calendar in 2023, **Moraes** was one of the variables in the Dakar 2024 equation. After spending three days in fourth place overall following stages 3, 4, and 6, **Moraes** has now cracked open the podium doors, clocking in 1 hour behind **Sainz** at this juncture. Sure, he benefitted from **Mattias Ekström's** debacle today... in a repeat of the very same strategy that he used last year to survive the war of attrition and climb into the limelight. This year, the Brazilian continues his carnival, still grooving one samba step ahead of his tempo from last year. Up ahead, **Sainz's** and **Loeb's** floats are still cutting shapes, playing a notch above, but a wrong note from them could set the stage for his annual parade.

A CRUSHING BLOW

Talk about double trouble! The Audi camp had good reason to celebrate the performance of their crews on the rest day. Although **Stéphane Peterhansel** had been knocked out of contention in the 48 h chrono stage, he was still in the race as a loyal squire ready to assist his brothers in arms whenever needed. No-one expected it to happen so soon, but 47 kilometres into today's special, **Mattias Ekström** went and broke the left rear axle of his RS Q e-Tron. His knight in shining armour rode to his rescue at full gallop, only to find out that fixing the car would take at least a couple of hours. As chivalrous as it might have been, taking on this arduous task would have left **Carlos Sainz** with the sword of Damocles hanging over his head if the special turned sour for him too. In the end, "**Peter**" hit the road again, leaving the second driver overall waiting for the team's service truck. The Swede's hopes of claiming the title or, at least, finishing on the podium lie in tatters, but the brand with the four interlocking rings took a major hit too. Only one champion can bring home the trophy for Audi now, but on the bright side, **Sainz** will now have two devoted lieutenants at his side in the jousts to come.

STAT OF THE DAY

24. The motorbike field has covered 2,865 km since the 46th Dakar got under way. No-one has done it faster than **Ricky Brabec**, who has spent 32 h 37'20" out there. And yet, after all this distance and all this time, **Ross Branch** is a single second behind him. This is the narrowest margin after eight specials since the Dakar first came to Saudi Arabia in 2020. To put this clash of titans into perspective, such a tiny gap after 32 h 37 of racing is tantamount to a distance of just over 24 metres, or 12 motorbikes strung together end to end. "Suspense" with a capital S.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Sébastien Loeb: "We had a good stage".

The BRX driver, opening the road today, benefitted from **Ekström's** troubles to soar to second place overall... within 20 minutes of **Carlos Sainz**. *"We had a good stage. No big mistakes. The navigation was really tricky. We were the first car, so... We had to make the line, but sometimes it's better, because we were really concentrated on our job and I was pushing hard, trying to be very conscientious in the tricky navigation parts, and we did it very well."*

MISSION 1000

[Mission 1000 Fan Boost Results](#)

The Dakar fans were asked to vote for their favorite project via Dakar Social Networks. Fan favorite project received 5 extra bonus points

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

In 2022, he had sworn he would never do it again. **Stefano Calzi**, racing in the Dakar Classic behind the wheel of **Jean-Pierre Fontenay** and **Bruno Musmarra's** Mitsubishi Pajero MPR 51, knew that bringing this relic to the Dakar was insane. Yet here he is again, two years later, with the most historic car in the field of this edition of the Dakar Classic, which came in third in the 1996 Dakar. The pair, registered for the Iconic Car and Authentic Co-driver double challenge, were 27th overall yesterday.

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

Nacho in Luciano's footsteps

Ignacio Cornejo, better known as Nacho, is hailed by his Rally GP comrades as the top-notch navigator in the game. When tasked with opening the road, the Chilean can dissect the road book and terrain faster than his rivals, but oddly enough, that has yet to earn him any glittering trophies. **Nacho** has cracked the top 10 five times in eight Dakar starts, but the podium has remained an elusive dream. His best performance was fourth in 2020. As for stage wins, he had bagged six before January 2024. The Monster Energy Honda ace had scored two braces, one in 2020 and another in 2022. Now, in 2024, he stands alone as the sole pilot to nab more than one stage win in this Dakar. Three victories, to be precise, adding today's triumph to his earlier wins in stages 2 and 4! This hat-trick marks a personal best and echoes **Luciano Benavides's** feat from 2023, when the Argentinian picked up three Dakar stage wins before going on to claim the world championship at the end of the season. With two sixth places in the W2RC under his belt, the Chilean is tracking the footsteps of his Argentinian neighbour.

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