

AlUla, January 17th 2024

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING

FOCUS

Fresh memories never lie. Seeing the loop carved out near AlUla, starting and finishing at the bivouac where everyone had gathered less than two weeks ago, it was a given that this special was going to be a wild ride. The timed sector stretched for 371 kilometres on sandy terrain with a need for speed, either on the track or off-track, sometimes through rocky areas, but almost invariably with nuances to decipher in the road book. The showdown among the leading competitors was shaped by tricky navigation in the motorbike race and, to some extent, the risk of punctures in the car race. **Ricky Brabec** took a step closer to a second title, while **Guerlain Chicherit** and his Hilux managed to weave through the pack much faster than all his rivals in the stage. The battle between **Carlos Sainz** and **Sébastien Loeb** rages on.

OUTLINE

Yesterday, they were rivals. Today, they are brothers in arms. Such has been the dynamic shift in the relationship between **Ricky Brabec** and **Adrien Van Beveren**, swinging in favour of the former and potentially catapulting the latter up the ranks in the two stages between here and the final podium in Yanbu. Tasked with opening the road, it seemed unlikely for the Frenchman to take a quantum leap in the standings. However, from the refuelling station onward, he reunited with his Honda teammate. A strategic alliance seemed not just possible, but almost preordained. One half of the partnership, **Ricky Brabec**, secured his first stage win of the year, the tenth in his career, pushing his lead over **Ross Branch** to 10 minutes. The other half, **Van Beveren**, managed to bring his deficit to the Botswanan under the 1-minute mark. Monster Energy Honda's teamwork could pave the way for a red 1-2. For now, we saw a Honda hat-trick for the second consecutive day, overshadowing the competition. Once again, **Nacho Cornejo's** spot-on navigation played a crucial role, securing the runner-up's spot just 2 seconds behind! The battle is far from over in the Rally 2 class, where **Harith Noah** emerged as a serious threat to **Romain Dumontier** after clocking the fifth-fastest time in the special (see "Performance of the day").

Once upon a time, not so long ago, **Carlos Sainz** and **Sébastien Loeb** were teammates too, with the Spaniard adding the finishing touch to Peugeot's victorious streak in 2018. Those days are gone and, as the 2024 edition nears its end, all that remains is a polite yet fierce rivalry. Today was all about avoiding punctures. **Carlos Sainz** had a stroke of misfortune, finding himself without a spare wheel after getting not one, but two flat tyres. His title prospects would have been dead and buried had **Mattias Ekström** not come to his rescue, although the whole incident cost him seven or minutes. This was almost exactly the time that he ended up losing to **Sébastien Loeb**, who also ended up frustrated after it took him fifteen minutes to change his two tyres due to a broken hydraulic jack. 13 minutes separate the top contenders with two stages to go. **Guerlain Chicherit** did not emerge unscathed from the rock-strewn terrain either, but he still managed to set the fastest time in the special. **Brian Baragwanath** in his CR7 and **Benediktas Vanagas** in his Hilux escorted him on the stage podium. The man from Savoy is now fifth overall.

In the Challenger class, **Mitch Guthrie** and his closest pursuer, **Cristina Gutiérrez**, 28 minutes down, took a cautious approach and gave the Brazilian **Marcelo Gastaldi** a clear run to his maiden stage win. **Sara Price** also opened her account (see "Stat of the day"), taking the SSV special on the same day that her partner, the leader of the motorbike category, also triumphed in the Dakar. In the truck race,

Gert Huzink picked up his second stage on the trot, while **Martin Macík** tightened his vice grip on the overall, where he has a 2 h 06 margin over his compatriot **Aleš Loprais**.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

A Rally 2 rider cracked the top 5 in a stage of the Dakar for the second time this year. **Bradley Cox** (BAS World KTM Racing) had already taken fourth place in stage 1. Today, it was the Sherco factory rider **Harith Noah** who came in fifth. It was a career-best performance for the Indian, who is racing in his fifth Dakar and has only managed to complete the rally once. Back in 2021, he became the second Indian —after **CS Santosh** in 2015— to finish the race, which he did in twentieth place. **Noah** returned to competition in the Baja Aragón after hurting his back last January. He is now second overall in his class, just 4'31" behind **Romain Dumontier**. The inclusion of a rider from Bharat in the line-up of the French brand Sherco can be traced back to their rally-raid partnership with the Indian maker TVS. India, represented by Harith and the constructor Hero, is making its mark on the Dakar scene. None of its entrants had ever finished so high up in a stage of the Dakar before.

A CRUSHING BLOW

The bombshell dropped yesterday evening, but it only became official when the race officials received a letter in the wee hours: **Nasser Al Attiyah** was not going to be taking the start of the special. The last time that this has happened was stage 4 of the 2017 Dakar or, in other words, 86 specials ago. This is **Al Attiyah's** seventh premature exit in twenty Dakar starts. This time, the cause was a succession of mechanicals that bedevilled his Hunter for two days in a row. While a stage win earlier in the race means he is not going home empty-handed, which he has not done since 2007, he did let down the Prodrive squad, where he could have been an invaluable helper to **Sébastien Loeb** in the coming two stages, especially in the event of punctures.

STAT OF THE DAY

3. The SSV driver **Sara Price** had repeatedly come tantalisingly close to victory since the start of the 46th Dakar. Today, the South Racing Can-Am ace squeaked home with just two seconds to spare over **Jérôme de Sadeleer** to claim her first stage win, joining **Cristina Gutiérrez** (T3) and **Jutta Kleinschmidt** (cars) in the extremely select club of women who have prevailed in Dakar stages. The German even went on to win the race outright in 2001. The Californian's triumph comes sixteen years after **Kleinschmidt's** last win in the car race in 2005 and three years after **Gutiérrez's** hat-trick in the lightweight prototype class in 2021. **Sara Price** landed her first victory in SSV and is probably eyeing a second one in the Challenger class in the near future, before following in the footsteps of her predecessors and scoring a three-peat.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Guerlain Chicherit: "I'm a bit surprised we won today"

The winner of the stage, **Guerlain Chicherit**, is back in the top 5 overall and has still got room for improvement. *"I thought it was going to be really hard for us because we started with a puncture [at] the beginning. After that, I slowed down. I tried to avoid other punctures. We caught some other cars. The dust made it really difficult, especially because our Push button was not working well. We finished the last 150 k behind other cars. Impossible to pass them or too risky. I'm a bit surprised we won today, but it's always good to take the win."*

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

The apple never falls far from the tree, as they say. **Lorenzo Traglio** is the latest scion of the Tecnosport dynasty, an Italian tuner that has been part of the Dakar landscape since the 1990s, back when it was run by **Maurizio**, il padre. Behind the wheel of a Pathfinder in period-appropriate livery, **Lorenzo** was one of the movers and shakers of the beginning of the fourth Dakar Classic before a mechanical sent him careening down the ranking. Fast forward to two days before the finish and **Traglio** is back within 2 points of the leader, the Spaniard **Carlos Santaolalla**, with a real shot at gifting his father Tecnosport's first Dakar victory.

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

Sara Price and Ricky Brabec California Dreamin'

The Californians **Ricky Brabec** (motorbikes) and **Sara Price** (SSVs) emerged victorious from the specials in their categories and are both perched at the summit of their respective W2RC rankings with two stages to go until the end of the first round of the season. The woman who back in 2010 became the first motocross factory rider in the prestigious Monster Energy Kawasaki team and went on to enter the 2013 Miss California pageant and win the 2019 Baja 1000 has other things in common with the 2020 Dakar champion. In fact, they are a couple. **Sara**, who has just begun her first whole season after giving the 2023 Sonora Rally and Rallye du Maroc a try, put her name on the map last week when she topped the W2RC ranking in stage 1. It looks like we have contenders for the W2RC Couple of the Year

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