

Grândola, 2 April 2024

2024 BP Ultimate Rally-Raid Portugal FIA-FIM WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIPS

BRAIN OVER BRAWN

Key points:

- Scrutineering for the inaugural edition of the BP Ultimate Rally-Raid Portugal wound to a close in Grândola today. 55 vehicles in the W2RC field (out of 148 FIA/FIM vehicles in the race) were cleared to start the race tomorrow morning.
- Among the 27 motorbikes and quads on the FIM start list, the leader of the Rally GP competition, Ross Branch (Hero MotoSports), will feel the heat from Adrien Van Beveren (Monster Energy Honda), his closest pursuer at only 26 points back.
- Among the 28 FIA crews in the W2RC, Carlos Sainz (Mini JCW) holds the championship lead by just 9 points over Nasser Al Attiyah (Nasser Racing by Prodrive) and 12 over Guerlain Chicherit (Overdrive Racing).
- Tomorrow, in a historic first for the W2RC, the prologue and stage 1 will be held on the same day, taking the competitors from Grândola to Santiago do Cacém and back. There will be live coverage of the finish.

BRANCH CATCHES A TAILWIND

HRC marketing duties have kept **Ricky Brabec** (Monster Energy Honda), second in the Rally GP competition, from travelling across the pond. This leaves four Honda factory riders on the start list. **Adrien Van Beveren** is the one closest to the championship leader, **Ross Branch**. The Frenchman got the season rolling with a podium finish in the Dakar and is now fourth overall with 24 points to his name. The **"Kalahari Ferrari"** has 50 points on his account, but he is not resting on his laurels. His next closest pursuer is **Pablo Quintanilla**, sixth overall with 17 points. The Botswanan has his work cut out for him this week in his bid to fend off the two Honda riders, who have claimed the last couple of rounds held in Europe. **"Quintafondo"** took the win in the 2021 Andalucía Rally, with **"VBA"** following in his slipstream the following year.

Ross Branch (Hero MotoSports):

"I'm not feeling more pressure but, at any rate, it gives me an edge. We saw in Abu Dhabi how everything started to go pear-shaped when the pressure eased up. I'm happy to see Honda back at full strength. Ricky's sitting this one out, but many of the factory riders will be here. This race will be different from others where you twist the throttle all the way back. There'll be a healthy dose of navigation, as usual. This isn't my favourite terrain, but it's the same for everyone. Some of the guys are faster than me, but it's all part of the game. The world champion must be able to go fast on any terrain."

EL MATADOR STEPS INTO HIS ARENA

The championship leader, **Carlos Sainz** (76 points), turned up in X-raid colours today, three years after grabbing the runner-up's spot in the 2021 Andalucía Rally in his latest appearance with the maker. **Álex Haro** will be filling in for **Lucas Cruz** on a one-off basis after the usual co-driver of the winner of the last Dakar had to take care of some issues. His compatriot is also up for a reunion, as he had not raced in a Mini since he paired up with **Nani Roma** in the 2019 Dakar. **Sainz** and **Haro** had shared a roof at X-raid in 2018 and 2019, but they had never raced together before. In his previous career, with two World Rally Championship trophies as the highlights, **Sainz** stormed to victory in Portugal in 1991 and 1995. Moreover, he will be racing on home turf when stage 4 starts from Spain. This is far from uncharted territory for **"El Matador**", who hopes to use his experience here to pad his lead in the championship (see quote).

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The winner of the second round in Abu Dhabi, **Nasser Al Attiyah**, is his closest threat, with 67 points to his name. The Qatari is just 9 points behind. Portugal is also etched in the mind of the back-to-back reigning world champion. Last autumn, he made his debut in a Prodrive Hunter in the Baja Portalegre. It was his third start in that race.

Guerlain Chicherit and **Mathieu Baumel**, who is taking over from **Alex Winocq** for a while, turned up together today, fifteen years after their last alliance, the 2009 Dakar. The Frenchman is a mere 3 points behind the Qatari.

The Ultimate class has the most evenly matched fight for the podium.

Carlos Sainz (Mini JCW):

"There was a free slot, Sven [Quandt] had a car for us, and we decided to sign up together. I have two goals here: on the one hand, I want to take a T1+ other than an Audi for a drive to lay the groundwork for the future, and on the other hand, any championship points I manage to grab will be most welcome."

THE SUNSHINE AFTER THE RAIN

The route of the rally had to be tweaked due to the unseasonal rains that drenched its host regions last week, but its overall character remains very much the same. In the end, the FIM race will stretch for 1,735 km and its FIA counterpart for 1,866 km, with 1,039 km of specials for both. The start will be hectic!

In a historic first for the W2RC, the prologue and stage 1 will be held on the same day. The first competitors will get the prologue going just 15 minutes after the sun peeks over the horizon. After that, they will set out to tame the 100 km special 1 before noon. The entire field will be brought together shortly before the finish line to provide live coverage of the last 3 km. The final sprint will be broadcast for the first time on Sport TV, the broadcaster of the premier sports events held in Portugal. Live footage with expert commentary will also be streamed on W2RC social media for the rest of the world. Tune in tomorrow at 3:25 pm (UTC+1) for the motorbike finish and 5 pm (UTC+1) for the car finish on YouTube W2RC or Facebook W2RC pages.

Carlos Barbosa (President, Automóvel Club de Portugal):

"The route is quite unlike anything else the W2RC competitors have tackled before. There'll be virtually no sand compared to the Dakar and Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge. What we have in store for them here is a real cross-country race in the true sense of the word, with all the sorts of terrains you'll find if you set out to explore Portugal. Fast sections, winding tracks, technical stretches, sand, stones, mountains, baja-type sections... and the rain in recent days has added mud to the mix. It's a tough event, cut from a different mould, and I think it'll spice up the championship. The competitors need to understand that this is not going to be a 9-to-5 job!"

Orlando Romana (Sporting Director of the BP Ultimate Rally-Raid Portugal):

"The route of the BP Ultimate Rally-Raid Portugal is the fruit of my 35-year experience in races such as the Baja Portalegre, the Baja 1000, the Transibérico, the Estoril–Marrakesh Rally and the first year of the Dakar start in Lisbon in 2006. Tomorrow, in stage 1, we'll find 60 to 70% of sandy tracks in an area near the sea. Stage 2 will be half sand, half hard terrain. Stage 3 will head north towards the heart of the country, on the tracks of the Baja Portalegre, which are faster and harder, and it will also feature a short mountain segment. Stage 4 in Spain will be a wholly different story, with a more open course on flatter farmlands. There'll be no vegetation, but there'll be a short technical ascent on a mountain. The finale will be 90% sand. The rain will have made certain sections rather slippery. Not enough to get bogged down, but it'll change the nature of some parts. This is probably the most varied route we could come up with in Portugal."

Jean-Paul Cottret (W2RC navigator):

"For sure, the competitors are going to have a blast riding and driving on this route. The crux of the matter will be the narrow tree-lined tracks that dominate the route. The competitors will have to keep their eyes peeled for little concrete bridges with holes on the sides, milestones and stumps right on the side of the track. They need to stay on the track and avoid cutting corners at all costs if they want to make it to the finish. Any difference in T1+ will come with a hefty price tag. You need to keep in mind that these are WRC-type tracks, but without the usual WRC notes, so visual navigation will be of the utmost importance. The Challenger and SSV crews could cause an upset under these conditions. The rain might've filled some hollows with water, but nothing too deep. On the flip side, there'll be less dust."

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Program

- 3 April:
- o Prologue: Grândola-Santiago do Cacém (total: 38 km / SS: 4 km)
- Stage 1: Santiago do Cacém-Grândola (total: 170 km / SS part 1: 97 km / SS part 2: 3 km)
- 4 April: Stage 2: Grândola-Grândola (total: 228 km / SS: 193 km)
- 5 April: Stage 3: Grândola-Badajoz (FIM total: 616 km / SS: 374 km) (FIA total: 747 km / SS: 388 km)
- 6 April: Stage 4: Badajoz-Grândola (total: 539 km / SS: 251 km)
- 7 April: Stage 5: Grândola-Grândola (total: 144 km / SS: 103 km)

Access the media content.

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Official W2RC website <u>here</u>
Official BP Ultimate Rally-Raid Portugal website <u>here</u>

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