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DAKAR 2023 : MOTORBIKES: A RACE OUT OF THIS WORLD

Key points:

- **Sam Sunderland** shines brightest among the 125 bikers slated to take the start of the Dakar from the Sea Camp. The title holder is targeting a third triumph in the rally after being crowned world champion at the end of the W2RC. GasGas's British rider is one of the stars that make up the varied KTM constellation, along with contenders such as Kevin Benavides, Skyler Howes and rising star Mason Klein.
- Their arch-rivals at Honda are bringing overwhelming firepower to bear in a bid to reclaim the throne, with challengers such as the fresh recruit Adrien Van Beveren, Ricky Brabec, Pablo Quintanilla and "Nacho" Cornejo, as well as Joan Barreda, although the Spaniard is no longer in the factory team.
- 27 bikers will be taking part in the 2023 edition in the Original by Motul category, which requires them to take care of their motorbikes on their own every evening —a pure, unadulterated spirit of adventure.

It feels like a lifetime ago that the talent needed to prevail in the Dakar was concentrated in a few bikers in the orbit of KTM, the behemoth that held the race in an iron grip for 18 editions in a row. However, some things remain the same, such as **Sam Sunderland's** ability to consistently handle the pressure at the top of the race. The Brit stayed as cool as a cucumber in the face of adversity last January to conquer his second title in the rally and went on to crush the opposition throughout the W2RC season and retake the title he had already won in 2019. The rock-solid "Sunder Sam" now rides for Red Bull GasGas Factory Racing, where he shares the stable with **Daniel Sanders**, who has already shown the makings of a champion but has been hamstrung and unable to race often since he hurt his elbow in the Dakar. Their cousins at Red Bull KTM Factory Racing, with three former winners in their ranks, are legitimate outsiders. **Kevin Benavides** has been their top performer this year, ending the season on a high note with second place in Andalusia, whereas **Matthias Walkner** struggled with an injured shoulder and **Toby Price** was unable to go the distance in a car in the Baja 1000 and on his KTM in the Rallye du Maroc.

The KTM galaxy has other stars ready to shine in the Husqvarna Factory Racing constellation, including the winner of the Rallye du Maroc, **Skyler Howes**, and his runner-up **Luciano Benavides**, who finished the W2RC just outside the podium. **Keen** stargazers should also point their telescopes towards BAS World KTM Racing Team, the development team focused on assisting the rise of **Mason Klein**, the breakthrough performance of the 2022 edition with ninth place at the tender age of 20, who capped his season with the Rally2 championship.

Another change in the star charts, the disappearance of the Yamaha factory team, paved the way for **Adrien Van Beveren** to sign with Monster Energy Honda Team and bolster the squad's title prospects. Boisterous in blue as he cruised to fourth place in the 2022 Dakar, the Frenchman has been radiant in red since he moved to his new team, taking fourth place in the Rallye du Maroc and winning the Andalucía Rally in his latest outing. This has not stopped the Japanese maker from spreading its bets, however, knowing that 2020 champion **Ricky Brabec** came in second in the W2RC and its two Chilean bikers, **Pablo Quintanilla** (second in 2022) and "Nacho" **Cornejo** (sixth in the same year), both have what it takes to seize the title at stake in Dammam. Indeed, Honda's roster is so deep that the factory team could even afford to let go a man who has 29 stage wins to his name and finished fifth in the previous edition, but **Joan Barreda**, now competing as a lone rider on a "satellite" Honda, remains as dashing and hungry for victory as ever going into his thirteenth Dakar.

Beyond the top-billed bout between KTM and Honda, there are other contenders in teams that evoke the fleeting brilliance of a shooting star. Hero Motosports Team Rally is ready to shoot for the stars with **Franco Caimi** and **Joaquim Rodrigues**, who brought the Indian outfit its maiden stage win in 2022.

The Sherco Factory bikers will definitely be burning with the same ambition, especially **Lorenzo Santolino**, fourth in the Andalucía Rally in his latest outing.

The 21-year-old **Mason Klein** has graduated to the "big league" after turning the entire Rally2 season into the **Mason Klein Show**, but **Konrad Dąbrowski**, who was a serious contender, will have to watch the Dakar on TV after undergoing surgery for appendicitis. This turn of events has bumped the South African **Bradley Cox** up to favourite status, but he will face a challenge from **Romain Dumontier** and **Camille Chapelière**. The rookies are also dead set on making their mark on the race, starting with former enduro world champion Alex Salvini and the extremely promising **Tomas de Gavarro**.

Original by Motul: the bravest of the brave

They call it the ultimate experience. Entering the Dakar without assistance means signing up for one sleepless night after another and a vicious circle of fatigue, but making it to the finish in such gruelling circumstances comes with unparalleled bragging rights and the satisfaction of sharing the whole experience with the rest of the Original by Motul field. A rule change this year makes former pro bikers and riders who have already stood on the Original by Motul podium ineligible for the classification. However, this has not stopped the Spaniard **Joan Pedredo**, twice fifth in the Dakar (2011 and 2013) and a former lieutenant of **Marc Coma** in the latter's victorious campaigns, from tackling the rally solo in what will be his fifteenth start. Just like category regulars such as **Benjamin Melot** and **Emanuel Gyenes**, he will be racing as an ambassador for the Original by Motul, an open-air garage in which every biker has to comb through his or her motorbike at the end of the day and fix anything that needs fixing. For the first time ever, five American bikers riding under the banner of "American Rally Originals" will look for strength in numbers in a bid to make it to the finish together, while a new female biker, **Kristen Landman** (55th in 2020), is poised to discover the joys and sorrows of Original by Motul.

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