

Sea Camp, January 1st 2023

Dakar 2023 — Stage 1

SUNDERLAND DOWN AND OUT AS SAINZ MAKES HIS BOY PROUD

FOCUS

The contrast between the prologue on the beach and the first stage of the 2023 Dakar could not be starker. Today's special followed the outline of the coast from 30 km inland on its way to Yanbu and beyond. The entire field was on high alert in the first part of the 368 km course, featuring the scattered rocky sections where Sam Sunderland crashed out of the race. From there on, the faster stretches between valleys and sandy tracks enabled Carlos Sainz and Daniel Sanders to let their raw speed do the talking. As a reward for their efforts, the drivers, riders and crews are taking the coastal route back to the Sea Camp for more than 200 km.

OUTLINE

No-one, not even a master of rally raids who churns out solid performance after solid performance, can truly tame the Dakar. The reigning world champion and Dakar title holder, Sam Sunderland, was once again the victim of the unforgiving nature of the event after he had to throw in the towel 52 km into the special (see A crushing blow). A new pecking order soon emerged in which the young American Mason Klein came tantalisingly close to victory in his first stage as a RallyGP biker. However, a penalty for speeding meant his maiden win will have to wait just a bit longer, and in the end it was another one of Uncle Sam's (pun intended) boys, Ricky Brabec, who claimed his ninth career special and topped the overall standings. Kevin Benavides and Toby Price round off the provisional podium ahead of Joan Barreda, who also let a potential victory slip away due to a penalty. While "Bang Bang" scored a near-miss, another Spanish stage hunter hit the mark in the car category. Carlos Sainz picked up his 42nd career special — Audi's sixth since it embarked on the Dakar adventure last year — under the watchful eye of his son Carlos Sainz Jr, who was visiting the race today. Sébastien Loeb, second in the special, found himself sandwiched between Sainz and third-placed Mattias Ekström, underlining the strength of the RS Q e-tron 2s. "El Matador" showed his boy how it is done by rocketing to the top of the overall standings with 10 seconds in hand over Loeb. In the T3 category, the winner of the 2019, 2021 and 2022 editions, "Chaleco" López, took back control by taking his first stage in two years, while Guillaume de Mevius prevented a Can-Am 1-2 by beating Seth Quintero for second place. The T4 race came down to a showdown between whiz kids in which Eryk Goczał prevailed over another 18-year-old, Pau Navarro (see Performance of the day). Martin Macík continued his recital in the truck category. The Czech followed up his success in the prologue with a win over his compatriot and rival Aleš Loprais in today's 368 km special.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

The kids are in charge now! The new generation produced a collective masterpiece in the T4 category. The youngest competitor in the history of the Dakar, the 18-year-old Eryk Goczał, came out on top in his very first Dakar stage. His father and uncle, who added a few stage wins to their names last year, have been gushing about his talent for a long time. It is now clear that it was not just their family pride talking. Just a tad slower, the Spaniard Pau Navarro, who only recently got his driving licence, also flew the flag for the class of 2004 by finishing second. He had already flaunted his driving prowess in the Andalucía Rally, where he won the category. You do not need to go much further down the classification to find yet another youngster: the 18-year-old Brazilian Bruno Conti de Oliveira has carved himself a place with the boys in the top 10.

A CRUSHING BLOW

When the 2022 Dakar and World Rally-Raid champion, Sam Sunderland, shows up for a race, you know it is going to be either a big hit or a big flop... and his tenth Dakar turned out to be a flop! The British rider started the stage in 22nd place and posted the fastest time at the first checkpoint, 37 kilometres into the race, only to take a tumble another 15 kilometres down the road. Conscious and mobile, but suffering from back pain, he was flown to Yanbu, where he was diagnosed with a broken shoulder blade. "SunderSam" has failed to finish the Dakar six times since his debut in 2012, but he has secured a podium spot whenever he has managed to complete the race, including two wins (2017 and 2022). 20% of victories, 20% of podium places and 60% of withdrawals is still an impressive track record.

STAT OF THE DAY: 7 TO 6

The duel in the desert between the two most recent winners of the Dakar quad race echoes the football World Cup final. The Argentinian Manuel Andújar won the stage and put 44 seconds into Alexandre Giroud, but the Frenchman is still perched at the top of the overall standings and as determined as the French national team to mount a

successful title defence. A mere 21 seconds separate the two on the leader board. A quick glance at their track record shows the Frenchman has taken seven stages to the Argentinian's six... Do not let it go to penalties, Giroud!

W2RC

The new year began with the shocking news that the W2RC motorbike world champion was out of the opening leg. Sam Sunderland will be unable to repeat his exploit from last year, when he laid the foundation for his title with a splendid brace in the first part of the 2022 season. He now faces an uphill battle to drag himself back into contention after drawing a blank in the Dakar. Season 2 is more open than ever. The Rally2 race also saw a major contender knocked out of the event, in this case, due to an injured elbow. Bradley Cox was leading the stage and had a real shot at succeeding Mason Klein on the throne, but he instead had to withdraw from the Dakar on day one. Paolo Lucci (BAS World KTM Racing) seized the opportunity to outfox Camille Chapelière (Team Casteu), with the overall standings placing the same two competitors in the same order. In the T3 race, the dominant force of the 2022 W2RC, "Chaleco" López, bared his teeth at his runner-up, Quintero, and his new teammate, Austin Jones. The same Red Bull Can-Am Factory and Red Bull Off-Road Junior Team USA 1-2-3 can be seen in the overall standings. In the T4 category, Eryk Goczał made W2RC history by winning a stage on his very first outing! In the T5 category, Martin Macík has been in a league of his own since the start of the Dakar. Among the car drivers, Carlos Sainz made the right choice to sign up for the 2023 W2RC and captured the stage win and the overall lead ahead of Loeb and Al Rajhi. With Chicherit, Al Attiyah, Ekström and Peterhansel within striking distance, it is all to play for.

THE MAKINGS OF A CLASSIC

New year, same old names at the top of the Dakar Classic standings. The Galpins and their Protruck drew first blood with a near-impeccable performance in the first regularity test. In the dune test, one of the new features introduced in the third edition, it was title holders Serge Mogno and Florent Drulhon's 4x4 which found the ideal route connecting all the waypoints on the dunes. The Galpins retaliated in the second regularity test, but another couple, the Berteloots, joined the party in third place before displaying their spectacular form with a win in the final regularity section. The Galpins, racing in their Protruck number 701 after finishing fourth last year, have made a New Year's resolution: climbing onto the podium. Stay tuned...

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Sébastien Loeb: "We upped the pace"

The Frenchman, second in the stage, holds the same position in the general standings, a meagre 10 seconds behind today's winner, **Carlos Sainz**.

"It was a nice special overall, but there were big rocks at the beginning, so we stayed vigilant to avoid punctures. I took it easy in this part, but then we upped the pace gradually. We lost just under a minute due to navigation, but it was no big deal, so it was a good special for us. Tomorrow we will be second on the road, which is probably not a great place to be if you want to attack, but we'll do our best."

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