

Shaybah, January 11<sup>th</sup> 2023

## Dakar 2023 – Stage 10 DUNE WIZARDS

### FOCUS

Here we go. The realm of the dunes has been the focus of conversation for several months now. The Dakar entrants got a taste of the Empty Quarter three years ago, when the rally nibbled at the edges of the area. This year, the race is entering this vast expanse of sand for real over four days, starting with a dune-surfing warm-up stretching for 114 kilometres and containing almost nothing but toboggan runs. After a long road section leading to this remote place near the border with the United Arab Emirates, it was an undulating terrain specialist who came out on top in the motorbike category. **Ross Branch**, aka the "Ferrari of the Kalahari", set the best time, while **Sébastien Loeb** won the car stage, as he always does when he manages to avoid any mistakes.

### OUTLINE

Mastering the dunes of the Dakar is a bit like walking a tightrope. It requires exceptional agility and skills honed during years of driving or riding on slippery terrain. The best dune-surfers are the most experienced, as **Ross Branch** showed by winning the stage to Shaybah. The Botswanan trains year-round in the Kalahari Desert, which he also flies over regularly as an airliner pilot. You could say Hero MotoSports' fresh recruit knows how to reach new heights. He has not been as consistent as he would have liked, but today he won his second special of the year, while another dune wizard, **Adrien Van Beveren**, set the second time at 21" and defended his fourth place overall. The man from northern France polished his handling skills on the beaches of Le Touquet, while **Michael Docherty** (see *Performance of the day*), one of the sensations of this Dakar, has become quite proficient at turning the lessons learned on his base camp in the Emirates into strong performances, with third place today. It was also a good day for the aces of the Dakar, as two former winners on the prowl for another victory, **Kevin Benavides** and **Toby Price**, now surround **Skyler Howes** on the provisional podium, which is still undecided with the Australian 2'10" behind his Argentinian frenemy. The driver of Hunter no. 201, **Sébastien Loeb**, also showed off his driving prowess and gained close to six minutes on the king of the desert (see *Figure of the day*). **Nasser Al Attiyah** remains undaunted, however. If anyone sees any drops of sweat on his face when he gets out of his Hilux, it is only because of the long-awaited rise in temperatures. Finishing fourth on the first day in the Empty Quarter suits the Qatari, not least because it means he will benefit from a favourable starting position in the marathon stage, sandwiched between two teammates, the Brazilian **Lucas Moraes** and the Saudi **Yazeed Al Rajhi**. In T3, **Guillaume de Mevius** still leads the way ahead of **Austin Jones**, but today's stage allowed **Seth Quintero** to add another notch to his belt with his twentieth career win, which puts him level with **Loeb**. Further back, **Ignacio Casale** (second) and **Hélder Rodrigues** (third) are shining brighter than ever in this category. **Gerard Farrés**, a regular fixture near the top of the SSV classification, was still in the hunt for his first triumph of the year. The Catalan can now tick that box as he moves onto the provisional podium and prepares to try and snatch the win from under **Rokas Baciūška** and **Eryk Goczał**'s young noses. The truck race has been turned on its head by the withdrawal of the leader, **Aleš Loprais**, following an accident that claimed the life of an Italian spectator yesterday. **Janus van Kasteren** is the new leader, while a former biker, **Pascal de Baar**, drove a Renault to the top spot of a Dakar truck stage for the first time since records started in 1999.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

**Michael Docherty** put his name on the map in 2022, when he won the first two stages of the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge against the cream of the W2RC crop before crashing out of the race the next day. After spending the rest of the season on the sidelines, the South African is making his Dakar debut with HT Rally Raid Husqvarna Racing, the satellite team of the constructor from **Mattighofen**. The former motocross rider, who cut his teeth on the European and American circuits before claiming three titles in the Emirates, where he is now based, took his third Rally2 stage today. Even more importantly, he became the first Rally2 driver to climb onto the podium of a special in this Dakar, 30 seconds behind **Branch** and 9 down on **Van Beveren**. The Saffa is fourth in the Rally2 classification and nineteenth overall after a mixed bag of performances. The next few days will offer him a new chance to make the headlines as the race ventures into his backyard, but it is his teammate **Romain Dumontier**, the runner-up to **Mason Klein** in the Rally2 category of the W2RC, who is perched atop the leader board. The Frenchman set the eleventh fastest time today and finished ahead of Sanders. His pace is great, but so is his consistency —the sort of reliability that could make **Docherty** one of the most promising riders in the field.

### A CRUSHING BLOW

As a grizzled veteran, **Vaidotas Žala** knows that the Dakar is never merciful for long. After a few ups and downs in the first few stages, everything had finally fallen into place for the former Mini driver, now behind the wheel of a Hunter. **Žala** and his right-hand man, **Paulo Fiuza**, had cracked the top 10 every day since stage 5. The duo even scored two near misses, including stage 9 yesterday, when they finished within a minute of **Sébastien Loeb**. The Lithuanian even played a part in Prodrive's first ever 1-2-3. Everything seemed to be going well, but disaster struck

today at km 44 in the shape of a mechanical that cost him over 4 hours. Even a well-oiled machine is but a toy in the hands of the Dakar...

### FIGURE OF THE DAY: 20

Back in 2016, when **Sébastien Loeb** first entered the Dakar behind the wheel of a Peugeot, which was making its big comeback to the event, he won four stages, mainly on the Argentinian tracks that suited his background as a rally driver. The Frenchman has since changed his vehicle, his co-driver and perhaps a little bit of his race vision and management... Enough to finish second in the Dakar twice while racking up stage wins. Even more importantly, he has now proved able to triumph on all sorts of terrains, whatever the navigation challenges, whatever the specificities. It is therefore symbolic to see the BRX driver take his 20th stage on the first day in the Empty Quarter, with over 100 kilometres of dunes on the menu and leading from the front. The apprentice has become the master.

### W2RC: TURNING BACK THE HOURGLASS

**Al Attiyah** and **Loeb** both know that the points tally at the end of the first leg will take place in four days. Of course, the Frenchman still hopes to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat but, on a more realistic level, he continues to push hard, as he did today by winning his fourth stage, one more than his arch-rival. It is a way of hedging for the future for the current season. Second in the virtual W2RC standings, **Loeb** knows that, were the race to end without changes, **Al Attiyah** would pocket an extra 10 points (50 for the winner versus 40 for the runner-up). The Frenchman is tirelessly chasing stage wins in a bid to close this gap. And, if he can keep it up, he could even do better than that!

### THE MAKINGS OF A CLASSIC

As is to be expected in a sea of sand, after the end of the stage the Dakar Classic made its own way towards a bivouac near Haradh, where the caravan is about to settle down for the night in a camp without service crews. The competitors will adapt the rhythm of their evening to that of the desert in nomadic tents. As the Dakar gets ready to plunge into the Empty Quarter in its fourth edition in Saudi Arabia, memories of the fourth Paris-Dakar herald this great leap into the unknown. In Niger, the ninth stage of the 1983 Paris-Dakar made the rally's first foray into the dunes in the "desert of deserts". A sandstorm in the Ténéré scattered the caravan, in some cases for longer than 72 hours. It was an epic stage, one of those that planted a seed in the minds of those who watched it on the edge of their seats back then... and went on to enter the Dakar Classic this year.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Mattias Ekström: "Come back stronger in the future"**

*"The car is great on the dunes, but for me it was the first time, so I was careful not to make a stupid mistake in the first part, and the other part was fine. It's not the race we were expecting. We came hoping, in my case, to crack the top 3. I think we showed that we have the right pace, but we encountered too many problems. This second week is an opportunity to gain more experience to come back stronger in the future."*

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