

Riyadh, January 8<sup>th</sup> 2023

## Dakar 2023 — Stage 8 HOWES AND AL ATTIAH IN CHARGE AT THE HALFWAY POINT

### FOCUS

The final challenge before the rest day left no room for error. The loop south of Al Duwadimi, originally scheduled for the day before, was shortened to 345 kilometres to give the entire field time to take the long road section leading to the bivouac in Riyadh. Before that, the competitors wrestled with the devilish navigation of the stage, both on the gravel tracks at the start of the special and in the sequence of valleys and chains of dunes in the finale. The gruelling course took a heavy toll on the bikers tasked with opening the road, even with the time bonuses awarded to the first three. **Ross Branch** pounced on the opportunity to claim victory, as did **Sébastien Loeb**, but it is **Skyler Howes** and **Nasser Al Attiyah** who are in charge at the halfway point.

### OUTLINE

Not everyone has what it takes to reshape the balance of power in the Dakar to their advantage. Many have tried, but almost none have succeeded. Yet that was more or less the mission that **Mason Klein**, the American whiz kid who is starting to rattle all his rivals, set himself for stage 8. **Klein** thought he had it in the bag when he crossed the finish line, but the win went to the Botswanan **Ross Branch**, who landed the Indian constructor Hero a second triumph to go along with the one that Joaquim Rodrigues claimed last year. Aware of the monster performance that he had just turned in and of his gains in the general standings, **Klein** was especially satisfied to take control of the race, as seen on the first classification sheets. However, a penalty for speeding stripped him of this honour and restored his countryman and mentor **Skyler Howes** to the top of the motorbike classification halfway through the race. **Nasser Al Attiyah**, secure behind a one-hour wall of time, was unlikely to experience such an emotional roller coaster, but the top dog refused to play it safe and instead set the second fastest time of the day, adding another two minutes to his lead over his teammate **Henk Lategan** in the general standings. **Al Attiyah's** reason for baring his teeth may have to do with **Sébastien Loeb**, who does not pose a real threat but whose progression required a firm response (see *Performance of the day*). The Hunter driver's second stage win this year (the eighteenth of his career) places him within striking distance of the three Toyotas leading the way. Meanwhile, **Carlos Sainz** did his best to make his RS Q e-tron E2 shine by going for the special... only for a 5-minute penalty for speeding to wipe the smiles off the Audi clan's faces. Stage wins are also what is left for **Manuel Andújar** to fight for. The Argentinian grabbed his third special this year but only managed to chip 2 minutes off his deficit to **Alexandre Giroud**, the most secure of the Dakar leaders going into the rest day. **Guillaume de Mevius**, still locked in a duel with **Austin Jones**, is feeling the pressure at the top of the T3 standings, with only 3'19" separating the two men as the rally overnights in Riyadh. The Portuguese **João Ferreira**, watching this clash of titans from afar, claimed a special in his first Dakar start, which was also Yamaha's first victory in the category (see Figure of the day). In T4, the Argentinian former quad rider **Jeremías González Ferioli** (runner-up in 2015, 4 stage wins to his name) took another step in his reinvention by picking up the stage win today, while the **Goczał** family breathes down the neck of **Rokas Baciūška** in the overall. Finally, **Martin Macík** polished his record while continuing his rise in the standings. His fourth stage win hoisted him up to fourth place, 38 minutes behind **Aleš Loprais**.

### PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

The stage win fell into **Sébastien Loeb's** lap, bringing his tally in this Dakar to two. The Bahrain Raid Xtreme driver found himself in 31<sup>st</sup> place overall after stage 2 and has since clawed his way back up the standings with dogged tenacity. 28<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and now 4<sup>th</sup> —the Alsatian driver is staging a remarkable comeback and has a real shot at continuing to rise day after day until he is right behind **Nasser Al Attiyah** in Dammam. **Loeb** is a whopping 1 h 52'06" behind the reigning champion, but only half an hour away from the bottom step of the podium, held by **Lucas Moraes**, and an hour from **Henk Lategan** in second place. The Frenchman has six days left to reclaim his spot from last year and take up his role as **Al Attiyah's** arch-rival in the world championship. A single point separated **Loeb** and **Al Attiyah** after the first leg of the 2022 W2RC last January. The world champion and the runner-up have not forgotten the start of last season. The Toyota Gazoo Racing driver intends to defend his lead without losing sight of the world championship. He has warned that he will be targeting the podium in the upcoming stages to stop Loeb from repeating his trick from last January (see *Quote of the day*).

### A CRUSHING BLOW

It is not that odd for someone to buckle under pressure. This is perhaps what happened to **Janus van Kasteren**, who got stuck for about half an hour in the first part of the stage. The time loss —roughly the same as for a puncture— was nothing extraordinary, but the slim differences at the top of the truck standings mean it comes with a hefty price tag. Yesterday, the young Dutchman on whom Team De Rooy have pinned their hopes was only 15

minutes behind the Czech leader, **Aleš Loprais**, but having to resume the race on Tuesday morning with a 38-minute deficit will surely make a dent in his morale even though he remains in third place overall.

#### FIGURE OF THE DAY: 1

Yamaha and the Dakar have a long-running love affair. The Iwata-based constructor has created iconic Dakar vehicles and thrust many of the stars of the greatest rally raid on Earth—including **Stéphane Peterhansel**, **Cyril Neveu** and **Edi Orioli**—into the limelight. Last year, however, Yamaha decided to end its involvement in rally-raid motorbike races... to make the jump to T3. Yamaha teamed up with X-raid to launch a new prototype, the YXZ1000R Turbo, which it gave to the X-raid Yamaha Supported Team for the 45th edition of the Dakar. It only took a week for the **João Ferreira** to carve a niche for the car at the top of the category. After several near misses, the Portuguese rookie finally put his name on the map with a stage win and added Yamaha's name to the annals of the T3 category alongside the likes of Can-Am, Polaris and OT3. Better yet, this makes Yamaha the first constructor to win stages in both the motorbike and car categories, not to mention its almost undisputed supremacy in the quad category.

#### W2RC: NASSER AND ROKAS RIGHT WHERE THEY BELONG

**Nasser Al Attiyah**, the reigning world champion in cars, and **Rokas Baciuška**, who won the T4 category in 2022, are the only two title holders who have made it to the rest day at the top of their categories. The Qatari is more secure in his position than any other leader, with nearly two hours in hand over his direct rival in the championship, Sébastien Loeb. The Lithuanian is not so lucky, with **Goczał Sr** and **Jr** five minutes behind him. "**Chaleco**" **López** has been nigh-unbeatable for a year, but he faces a much more complicated second week than his T1 and T3 counterparts. **Austin Jones**, now his stablemate, holds a lead of one hour over **Seth Quintero** and two and a half over the Chilean. In the motorbike category, **Sunderland's** early exit, combined with a top 10 packed tighter than an air filter casing, means it is all to play for.

#### THE MAKINGS OF A CLASSIC

The Dakar and Dakar Classic follow different paths for **Lurquin Sr** and **Lurquin Jr**. The father, **Jean-Marie**, made a name for himself racing with **Jean-Louis Schlessler** in his buggy, while the son, **Fabian**, first followed in his footsteps by contributing to the car debut of **Mathieu Serradori**, also a private driver in his two-wheel drive Century. **Sébastien Loeb** soon took **Fabian** under his wing, where he has been racing in the Dakar for the BRX team since last year. **Jean-Marie** and **Fabian** are currently chasing the same objective: to get on the provisional podium and, why not, grab the win if the leaders were to falter. "**Lulu**" let his nous and navigation experience do the talking today to win a regularity stage in which navigation played an important part with his driver, **Erik Qvick**. It was not enough to rise to fourth overall like his son and **Loeb** did today. The Belgian crew is fifth in the Dakar Classic. The two Spanish crews continue to dominate the Classic.

#### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**Nasser Al Attiyah: "I'll be home next week"**

*"No punctures today. We were careful to avoid them until the final section of dunes and sandy tracks, where we were able to attack. Finishing third is okay, I'm quite happy. All our hard work at the beginning of the race is paying off. Now we have to try and be in the top 3 every day to earn as many points as we can for the championship. Next week I'll be home on the dunes. There'll be plenty of dunes, but you have to be careful and take it one day at a time."*

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