

AIUla, January 5th 2024

SCHAREINA AND EKSTRÖM: A DAY FOR SPRINTERS

FOCUS

The name may seem misleading, with a prologue that turned out to have an extraordinary dimension, over a distance of 27 kilometres that was a condensed version, albeit a very accessible one, of the whole range of terrains encountered on the Dakar. The region of AIUla is ideal for such a sample, with sandy portions that were followed by rocky zones and even several navigational difficulties that led to several hesitations for some. However, the specialists in this inaugural exercise were again the ones to shine: Spaniard **Tosha Schareina** outdid all the other bikers for the opening of the last edition of the Rallye du Maroc, and Sweden's **Mattias Ekström** was victorious in his Audi on the loop around the "Sea Camp" on the shores of the Red Sea last year on the Dakar.

OUTLINE

Debutant is no longer an appropriate term to use for **Tosha Schareina**, who has twice finished in 13th place on the Dakar and won last summer on the Desafio Ruta 40, but today he began his first race as an official team rider. Honda's management team can give themselves a pat on the back for having recruited the young Spaniard, a target for many teams, who chose the Japanese brand to move up a gear. Behind him, **Daniel Sanders**, whose pace enabled him to take the lead at the beginning of the Dakar in 2022, also let his speed do the talking. The day's podium was completed by **Ross Branch**. The rally's favourites are still in the reckoning, from **Adrien Van Beveren** (4th), the **Benavides** brothers (with **Luciano** in 5th and **Kevin** in 9th), **Pablo Quintanilla** (7th) to **Toby Price** (8th), even if **Skyler Howes** (42nd) will have to bust a gut to remain in contact with the leaders (see A Crushing Blow). In the car race, **Mattias Ekström**'s past on rally tracks provided him with the suitable steering skill to dominate his rivals and start the race in a positive manner for the Audi clan, as he did last year. Without realising, he tamed **Seth Quintero** who began his career in the Ultimate class with panache, achieving the second-best time of the day, even though they will not be taken into account for the general rankings. The young American went all out to gain the opportunity of choosing an advantageous starting position tomorrow morning, as did **Sébastien Loeb** (3th). Brazilian brothers **Marcos** and **Cristian Baumgart** made a notable start to this Dakar with the 4th and 5th best times (see Performance of the Day), but title holder **Nasser Al Attiyah** paid for a small navigation mistake, which may actually work out well for him. With the 12th best time, he will start tomorrow in 12th place, which is a much better situation than if he had finished in 10th place, most probably obliged to open the way on stage 1. A similar mishap was suffered by **Guerlain Chicherit** (see Quote of the Day), with just as fortunate an outcome, because the Frenchman finished in 11th place. The first Challenger is not much further down the rankings, because the 13th best time of the day was achieved by **Eryk Goczał**, whose capacity to start the rally well is common knowledge. The young man from Krakow wasted no time in dominating his new category with 20" advantage over his uncle **Michal**, behind the wheel of a machine making a sparkling debut on the Dakar: along with the vehicles driven by **Nicolás Cavigliasso** (4th) and **Mitch Guthrie** (5th), four Taurus featured in the day's top 5, encircling the GRallyTeam OT3 driven by **Kris Meeke** (3rd). Renewal is also the watchword in the SSV category, with **Xavier de Soultrait**, winner of a stage on a bike in Peru in 2019 (and 7th in the general rankings), continuing his successful reconversion and proving to be the quickest driver of the day. He has been entrusted by Sébastien Loeb Racing with a RZR Polaris, the brand which launched the SSV category on the Dakar, but which had not tasted victory since 2018. **De**

Soultrait beat the favourite **João Ferreira**, but the performance of the Polaris machines was underlined by the third place achieved by Florent Vayssade, a team-mate of the day's winner. When all is said and done, the only title holder who occupies the lead in the day's rankings is truck driver **Janus van Kasteren**, who was quicker than **Aleš Loprais** by 16", to kick off the battle between the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

PERFORMANCE OF THE DAY

Siblings on the Dakar have a long history, since the **Marreau** brothers win with their R20 Turbo up to **Kevin** and **Luciano Benavides**, who lit up the race last year in the bike category. Today, another family duo has made its mark, this time from Brazil, by taking 4th and 5th place on the prologue just behind Sébastien Loeb and in front of the returning **Krzysztof Hołowczyc**. **Marcos** and **Cristian Baumgart**, five times winners of the Rally dos Sertões, the all-terrain race of reference in Brazil, already made a notable appearance on the Dakar in 2019. During their Peruvian adventure, the two drivers from Sao Paulo were inseparable, finishing the event in 6th and 7th position in the SSV category. This year, they have moved up a gear and hit the ground running in the Ultimate class. For **Cristian**, the elder brother, preparing for the Dakar commenced with the Sonora Rally and a 7th placed finish, then the Rallye du Maroc (19th), while younger brother **Marcos** achieved second place on the Rallye dos Sertões, behind... well, you know who, before 7th place on the Rallye du Maroc. Clearly, the brothers have got to grips with the Prodrive Hunter T1+ which bodes well for the rest of the race.

A CRUSHING BLOW

Skyler Howes is having trouble getting back in the saddle. For the cowboy from Utah, one prologue resembles another. Since the Rallye du Maroc, on his official Honda bike, the American has seemed to have been riding a rodeo horse rather than a thoroughbred that would ensure continuation of the progression he commenced a year ago. On the Dakar 2023, when riding for Husqvarna, he occupied the lead on the Dakar at the end of the first week before finishing in Dammam on the third step of the podium. For his first outing on the Japanese-made bike last October, Skyler fell on the prologue and did not even manage to reach the finish of the preliminary gallop. Today, the Monster Energy Honda rider once again bit the dust. Fortunately, this time he was able to climb back on to his steed, but then got lost in the canyons of AIUla after his roadbook gave up the ghost. With a 44th placed finish 5'10" behind his team-mate **Schareina**, **Howes** occupies the last position in the Rally GP class. As a result, the official HRC rider will most likely have to open the way tomorrow, which is an unenviable task for a stage announced as long, difficult and complicated to ride as a lone ranger. At least he will be very likely to pick up the bonus points at the beginning of the special, though this will be of scant consolation to him, leaving him little choice but to go for broke.

STAT OF THE DAY

4. Initially developed by **Mitch Guthrie**, who triumphed five times last year on the Dakar, the Taurus T3 Max could not have enjoyed a better beginning to the 46th edition of the rally. Already at the Rallye du Maroc, Taurus made the headlines by crossing the finishing line first on no less than five stages, three for **Guthrie**, one for **Eryk Goczał** and another for his uncle **Michal**. Today, the four vehicles in the top 5 have confirmed the machine's potential. However, it has been somewhat of a damp squib for the Can-Am clan, who were also beaten by **Ignacio Casale** on his Yamaha (6th). **David Zille**, the leading representative of the constructor that has dominated the scene on the last several editions, could do no better than 7th place, which is a first since the arrival of Can-Am on the Dakar in 2018.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

« *It was a real prologue. We haven't seen many like that before, a genuine mini-special with navigation, difficulties and danger. In fact, we got a bit caught up in the dust of the car in front and went left in a canyon before we had to do an about turn. On a stage like that, it's a costly mistake, but that's motorsport and it's not too serious. We've had a nice warm-up and are feeling good* ». **Guerlain Chicherit**

MISSION 1000

The “Desert Tigers” have showed their claws for the first time. Among the 10 vehicles that inaugurated the Mission 1000 challenge format, the one driven by **Jean-Michel Paulhe**, backed by his employer Airbus in his project to compete with a hybrid engine SSV, carried out its task without the slightest problem. Over a route within his range, the man from Marseille proved to be at ease and was very enthusiastic on exiting his vehicle at the end of the stage: *“These first few kilometres in the Saudi desert were magical! Obviously, we were a bit worried and wary of the slightest noise in the car, but everything went well. We're checking that all the measures we have to follow are correct, and that's the case - we're even a little better than expected in terms of consumption. Now we'll carry on learning”.*

THE MAKINGS OF CLASSIC

The two crews of the Porsche 959 replicas could not have dreamed of a better start, with a win on the prologue. Number 700 is driven by none other than the title holding couple made up by **Lidia Ruba** and **Juan Morera** who, in a tribute to the one-two on the Dakar 1986 achieved by the two official 959s driven by René Metge and Jacky Ickx, joined forces with number 759 manned by **François Larre**, a rookie, and **Jérémy Athimon**, the mechanic responsible for producing the twin Porsches. The parallel between the Stuttgart brand's historical one-two and this curtain raiser is undeniable and already represents a fine homage, only two days after René Metge passed away.

WORLD RALLY-RAID CHAMPIONSHIP

The 2024 season began today with the initial advantage for two times world champions and title holders Monster Energy Honda over Hero MotoSports. In the W2RC, **Schareina** leads **Ross Branch**, who finds himself as the filling in a Honda sandwich, with **Van Beveren** behind him. In Rally 2, the boss of the class, **Romain Dumontier**, has taken command in front of **Mathieu Doveze** and **Bradley Cox**. **Jean-Loup Lepan** completes the French grip on the top 4 while **Paolo Lucci**, a regular in the leading places, is only in 14th position today. In the quad category, Argentineans **Francisco Moreno** and **Manuel Andújar** have enjoyed a better start than **Alexandre Giroud**. As for the cars, the four constructors enrolled are in the top 6 from the outset, with **Ekström** for Audi, **Quintero** for Toyota Gazoo Racing, the **Baumgart** brothers for Nasser Racing Prodrive and **Hołowczyc** for Mini JCW X-raid. As from tomorrow, the first points will be up for grabs. In the Challenger class, the arrival of the **Goczał** clan has not gone unnoticed and has coincided with the breakthrough of another pretender for the title, **Nicolás Cavigliasso**, who leads **Mitch Guthrie**. In the SSV category, the predicted match between the official Can-Am Factory driver **João Ferreira** and South Racing's rookie **Sara Price** has begun.

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